

**POWER AND PLEASURE**

**THE POLITICS OF FILM ANALYSIS AND**

**FEMINIST COMMUNITY MEDIA EDUCATION**

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the value of feminist film theory for the analysis of representations of women in visual media, and the potential of media education for establishing a culture of critical viewing. Feminist film theory is thus critically considered, as are associated debates within feminism on the reproduction by media institutions of categories of gendered identity implicated in violence against women. An attempt is made to synthesise key insights offered by sociological debates within feminism (Segal, Vance and Riley), feminist film theory (Mulvey and Kuhn) and discussions of media education (Clarke and Masterman), with a view to developing a description of spectatorial relations which may inform community-based media education programmes. Central to such a formulation is a post-structuralist notion of the subject operating within gendered power relations. The thesis concludes with a detailed evaluation of a media education course for women run at the Community Arts Project, Cape Town in 1993.

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The staff and volunteers of Bush Radio and the Community Arts Project provided me with an understanding of community-based initiatives, of community education methodology, of media production and of South African media politics. It is through working with these organisations that I have been fortunate enough to recognise in community media an area of work to which I can, happily, dedicate my life.

## INTRODUCTION

During my postgraduate studies I discovered in the critical analysis of media - particularly that of visual media - an activity which provides me with great satisfaction. This pleasure arises, above all, from the fact that such analysis allows me to explore and express, in a very creative way, my own position, as viewer, within power relations such as those of gender, race and class. It has become important to me, however, to find a way in which this activity could have some relevance beyond that of personal satisfaction. It seems necessary to reposition myself, as a student of cultural studies, in a way that would enable me to put my skills in media analysis to some practical purpose. This thesis is written as part of my attempt to address the problem: I hoped, through my research, to define the role I wish to play in society as a student of media analysis. As such, the central aim of the thesis is a very personal one.

At the same time, I locate this venture within a general investigation into the problems and advantages of applying film theory to feminist practice. "Feminist practice" refers here to organised, conscious interventions into exploitative relations of gender, focusing on the position of women within those relations. "Film theory" refers to a specific set of texts: my thesis focuses on texts which form part of what can be referred to respectively as sociological, psychoanalytic and semiotic tradition in film theory. I argue that the roles which these texts can play within organised interventions into gender relations, are not self-evident. In light of this, I attempt to outline such a role for film theory.

The thesis is informed by an interest in feminist practices which aim to make an intervention into the way in which visual media define categories of gendered identity. I will focus, more specifically, on the need to challenge such categories by attempting to establish the basis for, or some principles towards, a popular, or widely based, culture of critical viewing.

Any attempt to "bridge the division" between film theory and feminist practice would, according to the framework of this thesis, be misdirected if it were seen as a shift from the textual to the "real". I assume, instead, that one should talk of a whole spectrum of activities - such as the production, censorship, distribution, viewing and discussion of film - as "film practices". The theorisation of film can, furthermore, in itself act as a feminist practice. Bridging the divide between film theory and feminist practice is therefore understood as a series of shifts from one level of textuality to another.

In speaking, above, of the "advantage" of bridging this gap, I refer to the fact that feminist film theory views the construction of meaning in media as a negotiation within power

relations. I argue that such acknowledgement is often missing from other feminist media practices - even though the acknowledgement of one's involvement in power relations is essential to critical practice. Feminist film theory could play a valuable role in developing such awareness within other feminist film practices. My attempt to find a way of applying film theory to feminist practice includes, therefore, an exploration of ways in which feminist film theory can make a contribution to the development of such awareness. Since I focus on the establishment of a widely based movement in feminist media criticism, I am particularly interested in the role that film theory could play in ensuring such awareness within discussions of media texts.

In dealing, on the other hand, with the "problems" involved in this application of film theory to feminist practice, I refer to difficulties I perceive in establishing a way in which such theory could have a more powerful impact on gender relations. I will argue that these difficulties are partly due to the failure of film theory to address the roles played by viewers in both resisting and reinforcing the ideological operation of film. Here I am particularly interested in two characteristics of film theory through which it shows disregard for the power of the viewer. It does so, firstly, in terms of its conceptual apparatus and proposals: these do not adequately address the role of viewers in the ideological operation of mainstream film. In particular, they do not acknowledge the historically specific and diverse nature of that role. Secondly, film theory is highly exclusive in terms of its own audience: it is written in a specialised language, and is accessible only to people who are versed in the application of sociological theories, semiotics and psychoanalysis to film. Both of these characteristics are, I think, rooted in the belief that only this small group of people are in fact truly capable of "understanding" the way in which media works. It is this belief, and its influence on the formulation of film theory, that I wish to challenge in this thesis.

Because of my interest in the establishment of a "popular" movement in feminist media criticism, I will address these restrictions on the potential of film theory in context of another practice: that of textual analysis. Here I choose to look, in particular, at the feminist analysis of classical realist film. These two forms of film practice are, in fact, very closely related: analysis of this kind seems to function as an illustration of the proposals made within film theory. I will argue that the analysis of a film is necessarily that of a particular screening, or screenings, and that it therefore presupposes the existence of particular viewers. As such, the discussion of analysis allows me to evaluate the implications of film theory for historically positioned viewers.

In context of this focus on media analysis, I am able to explore the possibility of



developing a tradition in feminist community-based media criticism. I argue that such a practice could be established by means of a programme of community-based feminist media education. Such a practice would, by definition, be centrally concerned with accessibility of media criticism to viewers who will not be familiar with film theory. As such, it would draw on the strengths of film theory as outlined above, while, at the same time, addressing the problems inherent to such theory.

In order to develop a tradition of community-based feminist media criticism, one must take account of current feminist concerns and strategies regarding the politics of media. It is for this reason that the more specific aim of my research project is to explore the roles that feminist community-based media education can play within organised resistance to violence against women. It is also for this reason that I chose to focus so much attention on the analysis of mainstream Hollywood film *The Accused*. At the time that I selected a media text to analyse in this thesis, this film was being screened by Rape Crisis <sup>1</sup> as well as other groups in their educational projects dealing with the issue of violence against women.<sup>2</sup> By focusing on this film I hoped to produce material that these organisations could refer to in designing such workshops.<sup>3</sup>

I also deal with three different sets of texts which, I believe, are representative of current preoccupations with the relationship between media criticism and the issue of violence against women. These sets of texts consist, respectively, of a range of feminist debates about women's sexual identity, different models of media education, and a series of discussions that took place in the 1993 Community Arts Project (CAP) women's media education course.

Within this examination, it becomes possible to look at film analysis itself as a political practice. In particular, I am able to discuss the relation between film analysis and feminist resistance to gender violence as an interaction between different levels of textuality rather than a shift between the textual and the "real". Nevertheless, by evaluating, in turn, each of the three sets of texts dealing with the relationship between media criticism and violence against women, my research becomes increasingly "action-oriented". The first set of texts (that of feminist sexuality debates) deals with theories about this relation. The second set (that of models of media education) consists of discussions of attempts to make an intervention into this

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1 Rape Crisis is a Cape Town based organisation which provides counselling for survivors of sexual abuse and battering. The project also provides educational workshops dealing with these issues.

2 Two other films that were also being screened regularly by Rape Crisis were *Extremities* and *Burning Bed*.

3 I would hope that such projects would now also select other, more recent mainstream films - such as *Thelma and Louise*, *The Piano* and *Once Were Warriors*. It is partly with this in mind that I have incorporated references to *Thelma and Louise* in later sections of this thesis.

relation. The third set (the discussions within the CAP course) focuses on the construction of a particular attempt at such intervention.

I have chosen to look at resistance to violence partly because of its "obviousness". Firstly, such resistance (including the process of "conscientisation") represents one of the more tangible and recognisably crucial forms of feminist organisation. As such, it provides a persuasive context for an attempt to illustrate the need for a practical application of feminist film theory. Secondly, both within media criticism and organised resistance to violence against women a relation is assumed between media and violence. As we will see, discussions of violence seem to be central to media criticism, while organisations dealing with violence against women often make reference to the role of mass media in creating the conditions which give rise to violence. An exploration of the assumed relations between the two subjects therefore seems to offer a productive focus for my research topic. Furthermore, I will focus on the issue of sexual violence since it is the discussion of such violence that is prioritised within these debates. In context of these preoccupations, I will then evaluate ways in which film analysis can operate as a feminist intervention into dominant representations of women.

It is, clearly, equally important to look at the role of other categories of social identity besides that of sexuality and gender in either challenging or reinforcing social relations which give rise to violence against women. One should, for example, look at the role of race, education, language and class. Although the focus of this thesis is on sexuality and gender, I will therefore attempt to draw out particular implications of my discussion for other categories of identity. These implications are explored within the context of my discussion of the CAP course - which forms the main body of the second part of the thesis.

Although the thesis is an attempt to integrate the study of media and that of violence against women, it is only for the first of these spheres of research that a theoretical framework and a specific feminist position is developed; the literature in which my writing is based is substantially that of film theory. The construction of this framework is then informed by my evaluation of *The Accused* and the three sets of texts referred to above.

The thesis consists of two parts. A chapter-by-chapter outline can be set out as follows: Part 1 consists of an evaluation (in Chapter 1) of film theory. Chapter 2 consists of a discussion of the way in which film theory is positioned in wider feminist debates. In Chapter 3, I illustrate the implications of these arguments for feminist media analysis by means of a discussion of *The Accused*. These first three chapters stress that feminist film analysis will only present a powerful intervention into the ideological operation of mainstream media if it

acknowledges the active and historically specific role played by viewers in that operation. I focus, within this discussion, on the concept of spectatorial pleasure. Throughout these chapters, I draw out the relevant of my arguments for the critique of representations of violence against women in mainstream visual media.

Part 2 focuses on media education - in context of a discussion of the 1993 CAP women's media education course. I argue, here, that feminist film theory can make an important contribution to the development of community-based feminist media education. Chapter 4 provides a link between the discussion of film analysis in Part 1 and the critique of the CAP course. Here, I discuss two models of media education in terms of their value for the establishment of a culture of active and critical viewers. Chapter 5 focuses on the deliberations which took place within the steering committee of the CAP project, around the design of the course as a whole - and, in more detail, the design of the workshop which focused on video material. Chapters 6 and 7 deal, respectively, with the discussions that took place on the first and second day of the video workshop. Within these chapters I develop a set of guidelines regarding the design and facilitation of media education workshops. I also deal with the implications of these guidelines for media education focusing on the issue of violence against women - since the CAP course was primarily concerned with this relation.

In writing this thesis, I have not attempted to document the full range of activities with which I became involved during the course of my research. Such an account can, however, usefully be provided in this preface.

In particular, it is important to note that the nature of this research project was strongly informed by my involvement with the Community Education Resources unit (CER) at the University of Cape Town. CER was a university-based unit, which dealt with the "popularisation" of academic research. I took part in a two-year CER training programme, which involved Masters students from a wide range of departments of the university. Under the supervision of CER, these students explored ways in which aspects of their research could be transformed into "popular" resources. The idea was that these resources should make postgraduate research accessible to people who have not trained in the principles of the academic disciplines involved. The resource should, in particular, be accessible to historically marginalised communities in South Africa - or people involved in work which is designed to benefit such communities.<sup>4</sup> It should, furthermore, be developed in consultation with such groups. By facilitating the development of these resources, CER also aimed to guide students in the development of their original research projects. Through their involvement with CER,

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<sup>4</sup> The term "community" was defined, here, as groups of people who share a "common interest", or who live

students would gain the necessary experience and insight, which would allow them to produce research, which was of some relevance to community development. The methodological framework of CER resulted in my participation in the development of a variety of resources that bear some relation to this thesis. Some of these result directly from my research, while others are projects to which I made some kind of contribution through my research. In either case, my involvement in the development of these projects played an important role in defining the focus of my research.

The first of these resources is represented by the thesis itself. Because of my commitment to the principles of the CER project, I kept in mind a variety of readers in the design of this document. In the various chapters, which make up the thesis, my writing has shifted repeatedly in terms of focus, style and imagined audience. This is, I think, a necessary characteristic of interdisciplinary research; the thesis deals, after all, with different spheres of investigation. Because of this, it is likely that readers of this thesis will find certain sections more accessible and relevant to their concerns than others. Students of cultural studies will, for example, probably be more interested in Part 1, while community workers involved in fields such as that of media production, feminist education and feminist media monitoring projects are likely to turn to Part 2. At the same time, I believe that both of these groups would gain from reading the thesis as a whole. In this way, they would be able to assess the relevance, to their own work, of spheres of research to which they do not usually have access. The central value of the thesis lies, I believe, in providing these connections.

A second resource which bears some relation to my thesis and the CER projects is the CAP video workshop which I helped to design - and, more generally, my contribution to the CAP women's media education project. In my opinion, in terms of their immediate aims, both the workshop and the course as a whole were a success. This project provided both the participants and facilitators, including myself, with experience in the complexities of feminist community education dealing with media production and media criticism. However, the long-term objectives of this project still hang in the balance. It remains to be seen, for example, whether this project will contribute to the establishment of local community-based feminist media criticism.

The development of such a practice would necessarily be a lengthy process of trial and error, needing continuous critical re-evaluation. One cannot establish a practice, which fulfils the requirements of an well-articulated model for community-based feminist media criticism within the confines of a single, fourteen-day course. Furthermore, the CAP course can only

contribute to the development of such a practice if it builds on the experience of others who have attempted similar ventures - and as I see it, we did not succeed completely in avoiding this pitfall: we found ourselves, in some respects, "reinventing the wheel". This is not surprising since records of previous projects which might have taken place in Cape Town (or anywhere else in South Africa) were not readily available. Part of the rationale of this thesis is therefore to provide a critical record of the CAP project. Here, the process of "trial and error" mentioned above has arrived at the stage of critical re-evaluation.

However, in its present form as a Masters thesis, this critique is not accessible to the facilitators of this course and cannot therefore play a role in the further development of the CAP project. In order to transform this critique into a serviceable resource for the CAP course, I would therefore have to find a way of presenting it in a more accessible form. It is in order to address this problem that I have involved myself with a third project related to this research, as part of my involvement with CER. I have developed a booklet, which summarises some of the concerns about the CAP course. This includes an outline of the CAP video workshop, with summaries of the discussions, which took place during the workshop. It also includes a commentary on the significance of these discussions and the success of the workshop techniques, as well as a more general presentation of my own aims and motivations in developing the workshop. This discussion is presented in the form of a series of cartoons which will, I hope, be both entertaining to read and provide stimulus for the development of further media education projects.

The merit of a Masters thesis does not only lie in the presentation of a set of conclusions about the research topic, but also in the evolutionary process through which those conclusions are reached. I have not attempted to document this evolution in the main body of this thesis, since my writing would have become excessively convoluted and reflexive. However, as with the discussion above, this preface allows me the opportunity to comment on this feature of my research.

The evolutionary development of a research project includes the struggle to overcome obstacles that restrict one's ability to achieve the central aims of the project. It can also be found in the constant adjustment of the strategies of one's research: as circumstances change, and as one develops insight into the research topic. In my thesis, this process of struggle and strategy took place in relation to two central aims. The first aim was to determine the potential value of feminist film theory as a resource for the establishment of a widely based culture of critical viewing. The second aim was to identify and evaluate a context within which film theory could realise this potential. Here, I chose to focus on community education as a

practice, which could represent such a context. I set out to find a way in which such education could draw on feminist film theory as a valuable resource. Through this research project, I hoped to establish how the political relevance of feminist film theory could be extended beyond its disciplinary boundaries. It was, really, only during the process of research itself that I became aware of the problems posed by the interdisciplinary nature of this project. I had to find ways of adapting the strategies of my research in order to find solutions to these problems.

I realised, for example, that - within the limitations of a Masters thesis - it becomes impractical to attempt to gain thorough knowledge of the available literature in all the disciplines which the research embraces. Because of this, I chose to explore some areas closely, while developing a more generalised understanding of others. I found this solution satisfactory, since it allowed me to focus on what, after all, was the central goal of my research: to develop a way of relating these disciplines to each other.<sup>5</sup>

This approach gives rise to some unevenness in my writing: in some chapters the subject matter is closely argued, while others take a more general, roughly sketched approach. The first tendency can be found in the chapters dealing with film theory, media analysis and the CAP case study while the second is represented by those dealing with contemporary feminist debates and models of media education. Through this approach I aimed to produce a document, which illustrates a way in which film analysis can potentially present a valuable resource for community education. Hopefully future research projects will take this process further, and develop a more comprehensive exploration of the various discussions presented here.

A second challenge that I faced, in realising the aims of the thesis, concerns my own position in relation to the boundaries of the disciplines I was exploring. To begin with, I was firmly located within media analysis as a sphere of study. It seemed to me that, in order to achieve the central goal of the thesis as set out above, I needed to extend my interest to the practice of media education - and, to a lesser extent, sociological analysis. Only then would I be in a position to develop an approach to feminist community media education. My attempts to reposition myself in this way affected the style and approach of the thesis as a whole, giving rise to a tension between two distinct modes of writing. While the more theoretical parts tend to be rather dense, these are counterbalanced with what I hope are fairly lucid close examinations of specific media texts used during the CAP course (*The Accused*, advertisements

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that my attempt to cover such a broad variety of theoretical debates has affected the referencing system for which I have opted. I often only touch on debates rather than discussing each in depth and, because of this sometimes rely heavily on one or two texts to summarise such debates. I have, in these cases, used a system of referencing in which the full reference is indicated once, after which the pages numbers will appear on their own in brackets.

etc). These passages convey, I hope, the pleasures and perplexities of this type of media analysis. The two writing styles index my own struggle to relate what I experience as the pleasure of media analysis to the context of contemporary feminist politics and community education.

It is, I think, in this respect that I have been most successful in realising the aims of this thesis. By participating in the design and facilitation of the CAP women's course as well as other projects, I have acquired experience in community-based media education. Through this experience, I was able to gain the insight necessary for my analysis, in the last two chapters of this thesis, of the CAP project. I have been able to develop skills that will allow me to participate in the further development of feminist community-based media criticism.

## **PART ONE**

### **FEMINIST FILM ANALYSIS**

**Examining the value of feminist film theory for the analysis  
of media representations of violence against women**



## FEMINIST FILM THEORY: A Critical Discussion

How have we come to perceive all forms of filmic gaze as male when women have always taken up their proportionate share of seats in the cinema? How have we come to understand cinematic pleasure (narrative, erotic and so on) as pleasurable to the male viewer, but not the female? Why have we failed to see our own presence in the audience when women have always watched - and loved - film? (Deirdre Pribam, 1988:1).

In the introduction to this thesis, I explained that one aim of my research is to establish a way in which the analysis of classical realist film can operate as an intervention into dominant representations of violence against women.<sup>1</sup> Analysis of this kind must be able to challenge the well-established and pervasive power relations within which such representation is based. I would argue that a feminist framework of critique has the potential to provide a particularly forceful position of resistance to these relations of power. In this chapter I attempt to establish an approach to the analysis of classical realist film which employs this potential. In the final section of the chapter, I will then draw out the implications of this approach for the analysis of representations of violence against women in such films.

Annette Kuhn argues that feminism does not constitute a methodology: instead it offers a perspective or frame of reference. Tools for analysing film from such a perspective can be drawn from methods of cultural analysis in operation outside the sphere of feminism itself (Kuhn, 1990:70). The aim of this chapter, then, is to examine the ways in which a feminist approach can inform - or even transform - the analysis of mainstream cinema.

Of course, feminism itself consists of a multiplicity of viewpoints. It would be more accurate, as some theorists point out, to talk about "feminisms" (Hutcheon, 1989:141). Gender criticism, it has been suggested, by definition will never be able to resort to a universally accepted body of theory (Selden, 1988:146). In the light of this it is not surprising that there is no clear consensus in feminist thinking about cultural criticism. Furthermore, the differences between feminist perspectives within such criticism are not clear cut. This is not just a characteristic of feminism restricted within such criticism. "It has become difficult",

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<sup>1</sup> Also called 'dominant' or 'Hollywood' cinema. Kaplan states that the production of classical realist cinema is still strongly rooted within this tradition. Such cinema consists of feature-length, narrative sounds film, made and distributed by the Hollywood studio system. David Bordwell, in *Narration in the Fiction Film*, extends this category to a stylistic one. Here, 'classical Hollywood narration' includes all films which observe certain classical Hollywood norms and conventions (Bordwell, 1993:156-166). Kaplan argues, similarly, that such films make use of "...fixed conventions of film practice repeated from product to product" (Kaplan, 1983:6).

writes Donna Haraway, "...to name one's feminism by a single adjective - or even to insist in every circumstance upon the noun" (Haraway, 1985:92). I will therefore attempt to clarify the differences of these differences between a variety of feminist approaches to mainstream cinema. My clarification of these differences forms part of an appraisal of the flaws and strengths of each of these positions.

It seems important to note, as a starting point to this discussion, that most social criticism which is geared towards changing relations of domination and which focuses on issues of gender - and sexuality - tends to be defined (and defines itself) as "feminist". Criticism from a male gay perspective might be one logical exception, according to my discussion below. I will therefore begin by attempting to pinpoint the characteristics of feminism which has allowed it to become such a well-established, all-inclusive and compelling form of gender criticism. I also argue that feminist approaches can lose their "cutting edge" if they slip into making certain assumptions. Through this discussion, I formulate a set of criteria for the evaluation of feminist analysis, and an approach to film which will form the basis of discussion throughout this thesis.

### **Feminist theory: some strengths and limitations**

Feminists have a stake in the critical project different from that of non-feminists: it matters to the feminist critic how "woman" is signified in dominant sign systems including literature and film, since that bears on who she is herself, on how she has come to be (Kaplan, 1983:7).

This statement by Anne Kaplan raises various issues relevant to a discussion of the power of feminist criticism in general - and feminist film analysis in particular. Firstly, it would seem that feminist criticism tends to be defined in terms of its focus on the position of women within social relations. This can for example also be seen in Kuhn's definition, in which she argues that "... Feminism is a political practice, or set of practices ... it offers a range of analysis of the position of women, and different strategies for social change" (Kuhn, 1990:3).

This holds true for feminist film criticism, which is typified by a recognition that mainstream film plays a part in the constitution of women's position within social relations. Secondly, as Kaplan's statement makes clear, even though such film criticism does not deny the role played in the production of social relations by the construction of masculinity, the focus is nevertheless on the representation of the feminine. Thirdly, feminists also make use of the idea expressed by Kaplan that critics make their analysis openly political, that they necessarily talk from a personal perspective as people who exist within the power relations they are discussing. This is in contrast to critics who position themselves as objective observers

who exist outside any relations of power. This, in Kaplan's words quoted above, is what tends to give feminists "...a stake in the critical project different from that of non-feminists"; their desire to know who they themselves are, and how they came to be. Finally, although Kaplan's use of the female pronoun might merely be a critical response to the customary use of the male as a gender-neutral term, it nevertheless illustrates a tendency within much of feminist film theory to define feminists (whether film critics, film-makers or spectators) as female.

It is with reference to this last point that Kaplan's definition of feminism becomes problematic. The relation between the construction of the feminine in film and women as historical subjects becomes biologically deterministic: an understanding of gendered identity as existing prior to any social construction. By equating "feminist" with "female", Kaplan denies, above all, the possibility of a fluctuating sense of subjectivity in which individuals can take up masculine and feminine positions irrespective of their biological sex. Within such an approach, the advantage of feminist analysis referred to above falls away.

In this chapter, I argue that the vigour of feminist criticism does indeed originate from its emphasis on women - as representations, critical viewers, and subjects constructed within sign systems - and from its emphasis on a subjective position of analysis. My argument, however, hinges on the assertion that this vigour is not the result of a realisation that the oppression of people as gendered subjects is an oppression of women. Rather, it is the way in which women are subjected by "dominant sign systems" such as mainstream film that offers a point of resistance which is not open to other subject positions. Catherine Belsey's explanation of the contradictory subject-position of women is relevant here. In contemporary western society, Belsey says, women as a group are produced - and constrained - by contradictory discourses. They take part in the "...liberal humanist discourse offered by society of submission, relative inadequacy and irrational intuition". An attempt to locate a coherent subject-position within these contradictions, and to find a consistent pattern of behaviour, can create intolerable pressures. One response is to retreat from the contradictions and from discourse itself, to become "sick". Another is to "...seek a resolution of the contradictions in the discourses of feminism" and to argue that "... even at the conscious level, although this fact may itself be unconscious, the individual subject is not a unity, and in this lies the possibility of deliberate change" (Belsey, 1980:65-66).

Denise Riley explains in a similar manner that, as a category, "women" is "...historically, discursively constructed", and always relatively to other categories which themselves change:

"women" is a volatile collectivity in which female persons can be very differently positioned, so that the apparent continuity of the subject "women" isn't to be

relied on; "women" is both synchronically and diachronically erratic as a collectivity, while for the individual, "being a woman" is also inconstant, and can't provide an ontological foundation (Riley, 1988:2).

Men, of course, exist within similar pressures, and are no less coherent, unified subjects than women are. The difference lies, I would submit, in the fact that for many women the illusion of cohesion is much more precarious - and that this allows them the "possibility of deliberate change". Riley makes this point in her discussion of the characteristics of feminist frameworks, arguing that "... 'Women' is ...an unstable category, ...this instability has a historical foundation, and ...feminism is the site of the systematic fighting-out of that instability - which need not worry us" (5). Riley goes on to explain that the precarious nature of women's gendered identity should not be viewed as a problem which feminism needs to address - instead, it defines feminism itself: "... it must be emphasised that these instabilities of the category are the *sine qua non* of feminism, which would otherwise be lost for an object, despoiled of a fight, and, in short, without much life" (2). Kuhn refers to this instability in the context of cinematic theory, stating that "...while the pleasures of cinema are obviously available to women as well as men, I would contend that for women there is an additional degree of instability in the relations of subjectivity upon which these pleasures depend" (Kuhn, 1990:16).

I would say that this statement is only true if one sees that instability as an advantage. For the male spectator to be oppressed "as a man" is not as readily recognisable a process.<sup>7</sup> One's analysis of film can be based in a discussion of the way in which men are oppressed as gendered subjects. One can even question the designation of gendered subjects within the categories of "male" and "female". Such criticism will, however, find it very difficult to make itself heard in the same way as a feminist analysis is able to do.<sup>8</sup>

I argue, however, that feminist film analysis can easily lose this cutting edge if it makes certain assumptions. Feminist analysis can slip into an understanding of masculine and feminine identity as essences existing prior to any social construction. It can also deny the possibility of a fluctuating sense of subjectivity in which individuals can take up a masculine and feminine position irrespective of their biological sex. It can also place such an analysis within a heterocentric framework.<sup>9</sup> Only if film analysis avoids these pitfalls will the

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<sup>8</sup> Gay politics holds a very similar position within gender criticism. Here again it is possible to say that "heterosexual" people can be just as oppressed by a heterosexist and heterocentric society as gay people - even if they are male "heterosexuals". Furthermore, it is quite possible to question the clear differentiation of people into categories of "gay" and "heterosexual". The problem is that gender criticism from such a position will not be easily heard - it does not fit, for example, into a widely recognised category of oppression.

<sup>9</sup> By "heterocentric" analysis I mean those which assume heterosexual relations to be the norm. Even analyses

construction of feminine identity within such films offer a point of resistance - both to men and women. In the rest of this chapter I will discuss particular feminist traditions of film analysis in order to explain the assertions made above.

### **Feminist film theory**

Kaplan states that feminist film criticism evolved out of the "second wave" of the women's movement and its preoccupations (Kaplan, 1983:1). During the late 1960's and early '70's, feminists came to recognise more fully the relevance of cultural factors to the critique of women's position within social relations. They formulated a critical approach to popular culture by employing a sociological methodology. As the inadequacies of this approach became clear, feminists incorporated structuralism, psychoanalysis and semiology into their analyses of film (1). These methodologies, in contrast to the sociological approach, took account of the way in which meaning is produced. The psychoanalytic framework is, however, not a simple improvement on the older tradition. Kaplan states that the two methodologies (i.e. the sociological versus the psychoanalytic approach) each refers to "...a different aspect of the human being": sociology to "people in social structures", psychoanalysis to "people's psychic structures" (2).

Both within the socio-historical tradition and that of psychoanalysis and semiotic there is, I think, a problem with the theorisation of the relation between cinematic representations of the feminine and "real women". Kuhn comments that the "specificity" of feminist as against other forms of oppositional cultural practice lies in this relation: "...the possibility that feminist critical practice may constitute not only a resistance to the powers of visual representation, but also an attempt to bridge the gap between woman as spectacle, as object of the look, and women as historical subjects" (Kuhn, 1990:71). I would say that this gap is reinforced by a dualism which underpins both traditions of film theory. One could say that, although the way in which they theorise the relation between "woman as spectacle" and "women as historical subjects" seem to be in opposition, sociological and psychoanalytic film theory each represents opposite components of the dualism. The clash between the two approaches is, I would argue, representative of this dualism. Kaplan's statement reveals this dualism by placing "psychic" and "social" structures in opposition to each other. The dualism is also found, for example,

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which are consciously non-homophobic can fall into this category. One example of this is a framework which takes the nuclear family to represent the basic structural component of society without recognising that only a small group of people actually live within such families. The nuclear family is central to society, rather, as familial ideology. Similarly, I would understand "heterosexism" to include not just homophobia but also the reinforcement of a particular culture which in fact excludes many "heterosexual" people.

in the way in which feminist film criticism places the "individual" in opposition to the "social", and the way in which the human body is placed in opposition to the construction of gendered subjectivity. Part of the task of feminist film analysis might arguably be to resolve this dualism. In my discussion, below, of the sociological and psychoanalytic tradition in film analysis, I will illustrate this point further.

### **Sociological tradition**

The "sociological" approach typically looked at the history of the "image" of women in popular culture, including but not specifically focusing on, film. Feminists in this tradition typically attempted to establish a connection between "...a given female image - say working women in films of the 1940's - and the historical moment that produces such as image" (Williams, 1988:12). Kaplan explains that images of women (and, to some extent, men) in films were discussed in terms of the types of roles that characters play: "...the image of the housewife, the macho male ...the homosexual, the villain ... the prostitute" (Kaplan, 1983:15). These images were then compared to people in these "roles" in society. Within this tradition, film analysis looked at "sex roles" in films, which were evaluated as "positive" or "negative" according to "...some externally constructed criteria describing the fully autonomous, independent women" (23). In terms of its treatment of these "real" women who stand over and against the images of women in popular culture, the sociological tradition therefore still assumed the existence of a gendered identity which pre-existed any social construction. One of the first books written within this tradition was Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape*, published in 1975. Haskell looked at images of women in classic realist cinema in terms of the "roles" and "stereotypes" these represented (Haskell, 1975:80). Studies such as this one argued that mainstream cinema was constructed chiefly for a male audience, and that women were depicted in films as if they were objects for the consumption of that audience. These insights were important for the development of a forceful feminist critique of mainstream film. Studies of this kind, however, saw a direct, reflective relationship between images of women in cinema and the social formation of which "real" women are part. They focused on character and story, failing to consider the operation of elements underlying the surface meaning of the narrative. They also did not address the formal characteristics peculiar to cinema composition- such as the cinematic image, lighting, editing, camera movement etc.-which, Kuhn says, "...operates in film either alone or in conjunction with stories or images and characters" (Kuhn, 1990:7). Both these failings points to a limited understanding of the process of signification in the cinematic text. Kaplan comments that "...the problem here is that such

analysis ignores the mediation of film as an art form" (Kaplan, 1983:16).

### **The psychoanalytic tradition**

Parallel to the "sociological" tradition in cultural analysis is a second, younger tradition in which feminists employ theories of semiotics and psychoanalysis. As in the sociological tradition, these feminists focus on the "historical moment that produces ... an image" - but this moment now includes the point at which the image is viewed. Before discussing this work, it is necessary to consider some of the founding texts of some of this feminist approach.

Theorists such as Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz see ideology as "... mediated through the text's aesthetic and technical codes". Pribam argues similarly that "...these codes, through repetition in time, cultural familiarity, context of use and so on, are themselves presumed to be infused with ideology (Pribam, 1988:5). Such theorists saw the formal organisation of film as a "...function of ideology as well as of aesthetics" (Nichols, 1981:303). The metaphor of cinema as Althusserian "apparatus" (Althusser, 1971:132-140) which these theorists introduced, was of particular importance to film analysis. Constance Penley explains the implications of this metaphor:

The cinematic apparatus is not merely the technological base (although the popular perception of cinema's "scientific" and technological origins are fantasmatically crucial to its reality effect) but the entire institution of cinema, its means of promoting and distributing itself and its administration of the social spaces in which films are viewed (Penley, 1989:60).

Within such a framework, one could no longer look simply at the "contents" of a film. One of the central and most productive insights of film analysis which followed from the metaphor of the apparatus concerns the way in which the formal characteristics peculiar to cinema as a textual system promotes certain states of mind in viewers. The notion of the cinematic apparatus was informed by Althusser's concept of "interpellation" (Althusser, 1971:160-165) and the Lacanian theorisation of the subject (Lacan, 1977:1-7). Belsey explains that Jacques Lacan's interpretation of the concept of interpellation can usefully be applied to the analysis of classical realist literature: "... classic realist fiction ... "interpellates" the reader ... addresses itself to him or her directly, offering the reader as the position from which the text is most "obviously" intelligible, the position of the subject in (and of) ideology" (Belsey, 1980:56-57). The relationship would also apply to the interpellation of the cinema viewer. Penley describes the way in which theories of psychoanalysis were employed in the theorisation of cinema by means of the concept of the apparatus:

Broadly speaking, the cinematic apparatus achieves its specific effects (the impression of reality, the creation of fantasmatically unified spectator-subject)

...because of its success in re-enacting or mimicking the scene of the unconscious  
- the physical apparatus - and the duplication of its mechanisms by way of illusion  
(Penley, 1989:60).

Lacanian psychoanalysis provided a forceful critique of the operation of realism within dominant cinema. Belsey explains that one of the most important aspects of the Lacanian theorisation of the subject is its confirmation of the decentering of the individual consciousness so that it can no longer be seen as the "...origin of meaning, knowledge and action" (Belsey, 1980:60). Within realist cinema, it is indeed this illusion of the individual spectator as holding the position from which the text is most "obviously" intelligible, the viewer as "origin of meaning", which is reaffirmed.

The infant, Lacan proposed, initially has no sense of identity, no way of conceiving of itself as a unity, distinct from what is "other", exterior to it. Lacan described an infant's entry into self-awareness by means of a metaphor in which it recognises itself in a mirror as a unit distinct from the outside world. Within the "mirror-phase" the child (mis)recognises itself as other, as image, exterior to its own perceiving self. This "recognition" is an identification with an "imaginary" (because imagined) unitary and autonomous self. The imaginary, then, refers to an illusory identification of the subject with an ideal (because autonomous and coherent) sense of self. Lacan argues that, in doing so, the child establishes a relation between itself and its environment (Lacan, 1977:1-7). Penley interprets Lacan's mirror stage as an experience based on a contradiction:

The child has the sense of being "there" for the first time, existing as a separate and autonomous entity at exactly the moment when it is "not there" because what it in fact sees is an image of a separateness and independence that it has not yet achieved (Penley, 1989:63).

The psychoanalytic concept of the imaginary was introduced into film theory by Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier* (1975). Here Metz claims that cinema is the ultimate art form of the imaginary because while it is more sensorially present than any other, at the same time that which it depicts is very much absent (40). Penley sets out a particularly clear and insightful explanation of Metz's theorisation of cinema and the imaginary signifier. She notes that the "absence" Metz refers to can be contrasted with the concrete presence of theatre - in which actors and props are present on stage (Penley, 1989:63). She points out that this combination of presence and absence in cinema is characteristic of the imaginary. The cinematic apparatus mimes the mirror stage and therefore "...structures for the spectator a completely imaginary relation to the screen...". Within this relation, spectators as subjects are given a "seamless illusion" of themselves as unified, coherent beings. This includes the illusion that they are



"making sense" of the text from a position of complete individual freedom of choice - they have an "...identificatory feeling of mastery over the visual field" (61). This identification, Penley explains, is the "... basis for the formation of a transcendental subject, the spectator centered for absolute mastery over the visual domain" (63). In actual fact, though, they are themselves constructed within that visual field.

Baudry and Metz applied psychoanalytic theory to cinema in an apolitical manner; they did not see its relevance to feminist analysis or, for that matter, any other form of social criticism. Their ideas were nevertheless useful to feminist concerns because they explained the uniquely powerful impression of reality provided by dominant cinema in a way that could potentially challenge essentialist understandings of the construction of gendered identity. Where the earlier tradition focused on a consideration of images of women in relation to "real" women, these feminists were interested in the operation of the cinematic apparatus as a whole in its construction of gendered subjectivity. However, the focus remains on women in the sense that feminists were still concerned with the construction of femininity. Feminist psychoanalytic film theory suggests that classical realist cinema is based in what one could call a "feminisation" of the screen. This feminisation works on the level of two interlinked processes: that of narrative structure and the "male gaze".

Narrative movement (or "narrativity") in classical realist film is generated, it is suggested, by a problem in the form of an imbalance, or lack. The process of solving that problem, regaining balance and achieving narrative closure is the task of narrative movement (Nichols, 1991:81). This imbalance is often coded in terms of gendered identity. At the beginning of a narrative film the contradictions within a patriarchal construction of the feminine become visible: this establishes the situation of imbalance. The "problem" posed is that of the threat of female desire to a patriarchal order. Narrativity is generated by the "difficulty" of the feminine; the film typically asks, "What is it that 'woman' wants? Why can't she be more like a man?" The narrative imbalance is then inevitably "resolved" in the end, by a containing of female sexuality -most commonly by the narrative closure of death or marriage. The treatment of the "problem" of the feminine, then, functions in the end as a denial of that problem by means of narrative closure (Mulvey, 1981:12).

Masculine identity, on the other hand, is the "norm" of gendered subjectivity, and is not problematised within mainstream cinema. The spectator position is "masculinized". It is out of this normal, "male" viewpoint that the "feminist" screen is watched. This relationship between the viewer and screen is, furthermore, one of "mastery over the visual field"-and, as such, establishes gendered power relations with the viewing process. This feminisation of the

screen and masculinisation of the spectator goes beyond the structuring of narrative. Feminists claim that the very realism of mainstream cinema, the illusion of reality which produces the pleasure of watching film, is based in such relations of power. These theorists argue for an interpretative use of psychoanalysis, taking Lacan's accounts of sexuality and the unconscious as descriptions of the place of women in a phallogentric order. They apply this idea to a discussion of men and women's position as spectators within the cinematic apparatus. One could say that the metaphor of the mirror here refers to the way in which the individual identifies with an image, constructed by society, of what they are supposed to be - they (mis)recognise themselves reflected in the "mirror" of society. These can be images of masculinity and femininity which the individual "recognises" as referring to him- or herself.

The "imaginary relation to the screen" is thus not just a way of explaining the illusion of realism created in cinema, but also explanation of the reproduction of the individual as a gendered subject. These feminists recognise that psychoanalysis and semiotics can provide a sense that gendered sexuality is not simply derived from the body but is an arbitrary identity that is imposed on the subject. They use psychoanalytic theory to emphasise the way in which sexual difference is "...denied or disavowed in the narrative system of classical film" and spectators addressed as female/feminine and male/masculine, within the cinematic apparatus (Kuhn, 1988:15). What is "absent" within the spectatorial relation is therefore not just the actors and props but also everything that the subject has to repress about themselves in order to identify with the screen. Jacqueline Rose comments that the psychoanalytic film theory revolves around the concept of repression, and that "... The imaginary, of which the cinema may well be the most privileged and efficient machine, is precisely a machine, an apparatus in which what is at stake is a repression of refusal of the problem or difficulty of sexuality" (Rose, 1982:16).

Laura Mulvey's discussion of visual pleasure and narrative cinema, which was first published in 1975 in *Screen*, was a particularly important contribution to the establishment of a psychoanalytic framework for feminist film theory. Mulvey outlined a model of classical realist film based on the metaphor of the apparatus, which assumed that it operates of and for masculine fantasy. She argued that psychoanalytic theory can be wielded as a "political weapon", in order to reveal the way in which cinema reproduces the structures of patriarchy (Mulvey, 1985:305). She focuses, in particular, on psychoanalytic concepts associated with the gaze - identification, voyeurism and fetishism (306). She stresses that spectatorship and its pleasures are ordered along gender lines, creating an active (male) spectator in control and a passive (female) spectator as screen-object. Male visual pleasure is the "controlling pleasure"

in cinema, and has two central forms. The first is that of "fetishistic scopophilia", in which pleasure that is linked to sexual attraction while the second is scopophilic pleasure linked to narcissistic identification. In the latter case, the male viewer's narcissistic identification works to strengthen the ego through same-sex identification (with male characters) (307). In the former, we have to do with the erotic attraction of male viewers to female characters. Here the feminine functions also as a threat: that of castration, because of the "real absence of the penis" from the body of women. The pleasure attached to voyeurism can weaken the ego, and is therefore more ambivalent than the pleasure of narcissistic identification (311). Nichols explains that, through her discussion of this tension, Mulvey provides a valuable approach to narrative movement in cinematic texts:

For Mulvey, male ambivalence toward the image of woman propels the film texts and the viewer towards nonmutually exclusive extremes: either to devalue, punish or save women, the guilty object ...or to make her a pedestal figure, a fetish... (Nichols, 1981:304).

According to this framework, women have a limited set of choices when watching films. These are not cognitive choices but draw upon unconscious processes. One of these choices is to take up the masculine subject position, in which case the female spectator position is "masculinized". The female spectator, Mulvey comments, might find herself "...so out of key with the pleasure on offer" in this masculinization "...that the spell of fascination is broken". On the other hand, " ... She may find herself secretly, unconsciously almost, enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic work that identification with the hero provides" (Mulvey, 1981:14).

The memory of the "masculine" phase in the female child's development, has, Mulvey states its own attraction: that of "...last-ditch resistance, in which the power of masculinity can be used as postponement against the power of patriarchy". This form of limited resistance is a fantasy "at cross-purposes with itself", restless in its "transvestite's cloths" (14). Mulvey seems to be suggesting that it provide a limited, even false pleasure. This masculinization is a form of identification that women are daily involved in outside the context of the cinematic apparatus. Mulvey states that "...for women (from childhood onwards) trans-sex identification is a habit that very easily becomes second nature..." (15). This might be why cross-dressing, for example, is less of a transgression for women than for men.<sup>10</sup>

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10 I think that, in order to construct a feminist analysis which goes beyond those caught in the dualisms I described, one has to decide what the female equivalent for transvestism is. Kuhn's suggestion that female body-building offers an equivalent transgressive is, I think, very useful. For men, it is a deliberate choice to change from "masculine" to "feminine" clothes. For women, it is a deliberate choice to change from "feminine" to "masculine" bodies. Maybe this suggests that for women, their bodies are their social (gendered) identity as clothes are for men (clothes make the man?). What

One of Mulvey's central assertions is that the pleasure derived from watching movies exists within power relations - that, in fact the pleasure of cinema is derived from those relations of power. The suggestion seems to be that one's pleasure in the illusionism of cinema is implicated in recognition of oneself as masculine/feminine beings. Furthermore, this recognition is implicated in identification with particular positions within relations of domination/submission which exist between individuals-within this rather heterocentric analysis, between men and women. For men, according to Mulvey, spectatorial pleasure is the pleasure of domination (of women); for women, either the pleasure of domination associated with taking up the position of the male viewer, or the masochistic pleasure of submission - and both, in some sense, are false pleasures.

Mulvey's argument has had a strong influence on the development of a theoretical tradition, which understands cinema in terms of gendered spectatorial relationships (Mayne, 1985:85). Kuhn speaks of a "substantial body of work" which proposes that there are three options on offer for women in terms of their identification with the cinema screen:

[Women are free] to take up a masculine subject position as is proposed by the huge number of films in which the enunciating moment is male/masculine or to subject to a masochism of over-identification, as is evoked ...by the "women's picture"; or to adopt the narcissistic position of taking the screen as a mirror and becoming one's own object of desire (Kuhn, 1988:15).

These studies still make use of valuable ideas that Haskell and other "sociological" feminist film theorists had introduced. As with sociological analysis of film, studies drawing on psychoanalytic film theory focus on the way in which women are made into objects for consumption. However, they approach this issue in a different way. Kaplan writes, for example, that in Hollywood films "...women are ultimately refused a voice, a discourse, and their desire is subjected to male desire" (Kaplan, 1983:7). Using psychoanalytic and semiotic models, feminists theorised that women have been defined in masculine culture as "lack" and "other"; film-makers and theories now discuss women's historical and cultural position as one of "...absence from, or marginalisation to, dominant cultural forms" (Pribam, 1988:1). They most often read the women characters who appear in dominant cinema "...as ...ground to an entire system of visual representation that negates an unspoken subjectivity of women" (Williams, 1988:12).

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these ideas challenge are a dualism between body and gendered identity. The question is not "is feminine identity determined by biology or by social environment?" because the body itself is socially constructed.

Within a psychoanalytic understanding of signification, assumptions about the relation between representation and the "real" necessarily changed. These discussions no longer saw a direct reflective relationship between "images" of women and "real" women. The "real" female spectator and the text no longer stood in simple opposition to each other; rather, she was interpellated by the "cinematic apparatus", which operates in the viewing process, as "spectator-subject". Unlike the sociological studies, these feminists looked at the ways in which meaning is produced rather than merely focusing on content. They no longer dealt with cinema as "...reflections of the non-discursive 'real' or empirically discoverable word" (Sheridan, 1988:2). They paid attention, rather, to the ways in which reality is always discursively constructed for us. Sheridan explains that this was a more valuable approach to the relation between images of women in mainstream cinema and real women:

[This kind of critical practice] ...is crucial to the major shift in feminist politics generally, from a preoccupation with describing and denouncing sexism while celebrating an already constituted femininity to a concern with intervening into the processes by which "woman" is constructed so that women are socially exploited and the feminine culturally devalued (Sheridan, 1988:2).

### **Critical evaluation**

At the beginning of this chapter I suggested that feminist film theory should bridge the gap between woman as spectacle, as object of the look, and women as historical subjects. The psychoanalytic semiotic argument began this task by criticising sociological film theory for its simplistic understanding of the relation between "real" women and their inaccurate/accurate representation in film. Williams comments that the key concept of analysis within the older sociological tradition had been the accurate or inaccurate reflection of historical and cultural "reality". She explains that more recent theorisation emphasises the concept of repression: "...the key concept in the analysis of (the) only apparent representation of women has been repression: the often devious ways in which texts that supposedly represent women actually repress them" (Williams, 1988:12).

In contrast to the sociological tradition, psychoanalytic film theory showed how (female) spectators are constructed by the text in such a way that much of their identity is denied. However, some feminists criticised such analysis for its homogeneity and closure. Eve Bertelsen notes, for example, that film theory that draws on the writing of Althusser and Lacan tends to be characterised by "...lack of interest in specific and located viewing experience". Within the context of gender, this neglect of context may lead to a highly restrictive form of film analysis (Bertelsen, 1991:12). Penley argues that the metaphor of the

apparatus places restrictions on film criticism similar to those of classical realist cinema itself: "[Such analyses] close off those same questions of sexual difference that it claims are denied or disavowed in the narrative system of classical film" (Penley, 1989:59). Penley remarks, for example, that film analysis of this kind views dominant cinema as a technological, institutional, and physical "bachelor machine" of which the distinguishing feature is that it "...does not tend to write woman... The machine's chief distinction is its being male" (60). The filmic gaze "belongs" to the male, leaving female audiences to identify with either the male-as-subject or female-as-object (Pribam, 1988:1). Women are made into exhibitionists to be observed and displayed, "...coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 1985:11). As spectators they are left in the position of either narcissistic identification or "...some kind of psychic cross-dressing" (Hutcheon, 1989:152). "Women", then, is not a subject in her own right but the object by which the patriarchal subject can define himself. Within this framework, classic realist cinema addresses "woman" as non-subject, eliminating the possibility of an "authentic" female spectator altogether. In other words, she is left with no active spectatorial position at all. Deirdre Pribam suggests that the psychoanalytic framework does not differentiate at all between the subject formulated by the text and the spectator-subject viewing the text: "The intention of the text and the reception of textual meaning are defined as one and the same" (Pribam, 1988:4). Penley comments that, if the apparatus is always totally successful, creating a unified, transcendental subject and a completely imaginary relation of the spectator to the screen, then there is little hope for political change. It begins to "... look like mere wish-fulfilment to (attempt to) ...subvert its power. There must be a way of recognising the pervasive power of the apparatus without sacrificing this sense of acceptance on the altar of fatalism" (Penley, 1989:62).

The metaphor of the cinematic apparatus banished women as agents from the discussion altogether, the repression complete, stating that there is no room for them in dominant cinema. It is assumed, here, that cinematic texts impose ideology on a fixed audience in a fixed manner. This means that the aesthetic and technical codes of dominant ideology can impose only dominant ideology. Cinematic theory thus became implicated in a denial of the female spectator, in the same way as dominant cinema was supposed to deny her presence. Pribam points out the irony of this denial:

How have we come to perceive all forms of filmic gaze as male when women have always taken up their proportionate share of seats in the cinema? How have

we come to understand cinematic pleasure (narrative, erotic and so on) as pleasurable to the male viewer, but not the female? Why have we failed to see our own presence in the audience when women have always watched - and loved - film? (Pribam, 1988:1).

In other words, in questioning the "real" women within sociological theories, the new tradition goes to the opposite extreme, focusing only on women as object of the look. Such analysis merely takes up the opposite component of the dualism which, as I noted earlier, underpins both traditions.

### **Responses to the bachelor machine**

As a response to the lack of an active female spectator position within psychoanalytic theories of cinema, feminists attempted to establish "authentic" voices for women. These feminists were involved in what Kuhn calls "...a quest for a 'new voice', a transformation of vision - a wholly understandable desire to stand outside these powers" (Kuhn, 1990:168). Some variants of American and European cultural and radical feminism, writes Riley, "...retain a faith in the integrity of "women" as a category:

Some proffer versions of a female nature or independent system of values, which, ironically, a rather older feminism has always sought to shred to bits, while many factions flourish in the shade cast by these powerful contemporary naturalisms about "women" (Riley, 1988:2).

Copjek, for example, argued that the central role of narcissism in the structuring of human subjectivity requires men and women to define themselves in terms of a third term which stands for the insufficiency of the subject - the phallus - and that psychoanalysis thus fails to provide a theory of women's autonomous symbolic representations because it excludes the woman's body (Penley, 1989:75). In the light of this, feminists attempted to reappropriate the female body. Linda Hutcheon states that some feminist theory attempts this reappropriation in terms which assume that "... the body of woman, when used by men, is colonised, appropriated, even mystified; when used by women, that body reveals its fertility and self-sufficient sexuality... (Hutcheon, 1989:158). Penley cites some recent feminist attempts, which have attempted to put the female body back into film theory:

Julia Kristeva's celebration of the woman's special relation to the pre-Oedipal mother's body, Michele Montrelay's emphasis on the 'real' of the woman's body which imposes itself prior to any act of construction, Luce Irigaray's mapping of the feminine psyche onto that body's supposedly multiple sexualities (Penley, 1989:76).

Feminist criticism which claims a "feminine voice" in this way is not necessarily an essentialist project. A good deal of exciting and valuable work of this kind has appeared in recent years.



However, they risk, often quite knowingly, a return to biologism in order to provide "woman" with an "autonomous symbolic representation" (75). We saw that what psychoanalysis achieved for feminists was an emphasis on the way that sexual identity is imposed "from the outside". Feminist discussions of the cinematic apparatus were a critique of the way in which the construction of sexual difference is made invisible. What we need as a counter to the "maleness" of the cinematic apparatus is not to reintroduce the feminine body into those theories. Penley points out that to say that femininity is in any way natural, or the simple product of the body's development, "...effaces the difficulty of femininity as a sexual position or category in relation to the symbolic as well as social order" (77). By deriving gendered sexuality from the body, no matter how indirectly, what is in danger of disappearing is the sense of sexuality as an arbitrary identity that is imposed on the subject, as a law. Penley describes the problem as follows:

If ... theories of the apparatus constantly reproduce the same ... point of view through their repeated emphasis on structures of masculine voyeurism, fetishism, and identification; and if ... film theory's use of the concept of the imaginary tends to elide questions of sexual difference, is there any way in which the "excluded" woman can be reintroduced without falling back upon appeals to feminine identity and essence? Is it possible to dismantle, or rather to debachelorise, the bachelor machine? (73).

Penley suggests that we must "... insist on a way of theorising ... cinema that does not eliminate the question of sexual difference" (79). The theorisation of cinema as a "bachelor machine" leaves one to conclude that "woman" is not a subject in her own right but the object by which the patriarchal subject can define himself. It seems to me that the point at which this theorisation becomes problematic is when one equates the "male gaze" with the "male subject", and "woman" with "women".

Riley's account of "... the changing relations of " ... 'woman' and her variants to the concept of general humanity" seems to offer a particularly valuable context within which a discussion of the cinematic apparatus can go beyond such essentialism (Riley, 1988:8). Riley states that the history of concepts of the feminine/female does not consist of an "... underlying continuity of women, above whose constant bodies changing aerial descriptions dance"(Riley, 1988:7) and that the " ... arrangement of people under the banners of 'men' and 'women' are enmeshed with the histories of other concepts too, including 'the social' and 'the body' ... this has profound repercussions for feminism" (7). Riley shows how, within nineteenth century sciences, "society" came to rely on the concept of "man" - as the " ... opposite which secured its own balance" (14). The way in which these two components related to each other, the " ... problem of how the individual stood vis-à-vis the world", became endlessly discussed by



these sciences. According to Riley's view, it was not so much that women were omitted from this framework, as that they were "... too thoroughly included in an symmetrical manner":

They were not the submerged opposite of man, and as such only in need of being fished up; they formed, rather, a kind of continuum of sociality against which the political was set ... When this effectively feminised social was then set over and against 'man', then the alignments of the sexes in the social realm were conceptualised askew (15).

While "woman" was immersed in society, "man" faced a society "... already permeated by the feminine" (15). Modern concepts of "men" and "women" thus stand in asymmetrical relation to the concept of the "human". This description seems to form a parallel to that found within the feminist version of the cinematic apparatus, in which the spectator position is masculinized and the screen feminised. However, Riley does not equate masculine and feminine subject positions with an essentialist understanding of gender and sexuality - which means that she is able to challenge the idea of a reintroduction of the female body into theory. She describes feminist theories of the apparatus, and the essentialist response to it, as follows: "... those schools of thought which in saying that 'woman' is fictional are silent about 'women', and those which, from an opposite perspective, proclaim that the reality of women is yet to come, but that this time, its we, women, who will define her" (5). Instead of "veering between deconstruction and transcendence" in this way, we could try another train of speculation (as quoted in the introduction to this chapter), arguing that " ... 'women' is indeed an unstable category, that this instability has a historical foundation, and that feminism is the site of the systematic fighting-out of that stability - which need nor worry us" (5). It is, I think, here that one can find a way of resolving the deadlock found in the theory of the cinematic apparatus. The answer lies not so much in creating an alternative feminine voice, as in pointing out that it is exactly because of the uncomfortable fit between women and the screen, in the transvestism of feminine identity, that they are given a point of resistance. It is, in other words, the profoundly contradictory interpellation of women which offers the possibility of changing society.

### **Reassessing Mulvey's denial of pleasure**

In order to transcend the essentialist understanding of gender and sexuality within feminist film theory one has to go back, I think, to a very important assertion made by Mulvey; that the pleasures of spectatorship are necessarily caught up in power relations. Kuhn explains that female spectators cannot therefore indulge in spectatorial pleasure without involving themselves in these power relations, since, for a woman, " ... assenting to the pleasures afforded by

cinema is tantamount to becoming caught up ... in certain relations of power, held in place by these relations and by the constructs of sexuality they inscribe" (Kuhn, 1990:16). Mulvey's discussion of the denial of the construction of sexual difference within dominant cinema focused particularly on the way in which the pleasures of spectatorship become naturalised, the way in which "... desire and pleasure are socially validated and normalized" (Hutcheon, 1989:152). Mulvey accepted that "... all dominant images are basically male constructs", and a feminist cinematic language must be constructed in context of this fact. She states that a feminist cinema has to be what she calls a "counter cinema", which operates as a response to mainstream cinema. She then also suggests that, since cinematic pleasure is necessarily caught up in patriarchal power relations, one cannot construct an authentically feminine pleasure outside the structures of dominant cinema. It is in this context that Mulvey argues for a feminist renunciation of cinematic pleasure:

It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article. The satisfaction and reinforcement of the ego that represent the high point of film history hitherto must be attacked. Not in favour of a reconstructed new pleasure, which cannot exist in the abstract, nor of intellectualised unpleasure, but to make way for a total negation of the ease and plenitude of the narrative fiction film (Mulvey, 1985:306).

She comments that counter cinema has to be based, then, in a refusal of pleasure. According to her theorisation, any pleasure that the female spectator derives from classical realist cinema is "false" because it is based on woman as object of someone else's desire, and is necessarily structured by a patriarchal order (Nichols, 1981:304). Since one cannot construct feminine spectatorial pleasure outside those power relations, feminists can only deny such pleasure altogether. This denial, Mulvey argued, was a necessary prerequisite for freedom. Kuhn's response to the denial of cinematic pleasure is to comment, rather tentatively that "... in the end ... perhaps a feminist critical practice can do no more than offer the - not inconsiderable - pleasure of resistance?" (Kuhn, 1990:22). It is clear that Mulvey equates cinematic pleasure with the "ease and plenitude" of this illusionism. By definition, then, spectatorial pleasure cannot be a tool of resistance and criticism and the "pleasure of resistance" cannot be a spectatorial pleasure. I think that one should challenge this negativity regarding pleasure in order to propose a more satisfying feminist critique.

Mulvey did not pursue the implications involved in equating a "denial of ease and plenitude" with a denial of spectatorial pleasure. Penley argues that feminist film theory has, in fact, generally failed to explore these implications. The question of pleasure, she comments, has been a "... crucially troubling one for feminist film theory and filmmaking, and the theory of the apparatus appears to answer the question before it is even raised" (Penley, 1989:62). There

are problems with the renunciation of spectatorial pleasure. Firstly, the value of Mulvey's discussion of counter-cinema lies in her assertion that the search for new forms of expression is more productively seen in terms of "... resistance to the powers of representation than as taking place outside their 'field of force'" (Mulvey, 1985:305). Feminist resistance should start, then, from recognition of its own inevitable involvement in patriarchal power relations. However, her proposal that the feminist response to the "bachelor machine" should be a refusal of spectatorial pleasure is inconsistent with this. It is a refusal to be implicated in the power relations of cinema - a stance that Mulvey herself has challenged. Secondly, the denial of pleasure needs to be examined within the context of a feminist attempt to alter public consciousness about gender politics. Here, the development of a feminist cinema based on a critique of spectatorship also involves a consideration of a film's widespread appeal and influence: its accessibility to large audiences. Even though there is a well-established feminist counter-cinema, classical realism has remained the dominant mode of cinema. Film is still "... dominated by narrative illusionism in spite of the efforts of an active avant-garde" (Belsey, 1980:126). Thirdly, as Kaplan remarks, feminist film critics are caught in a paradox - that of their fascination with Hollywood films, rather than with avant-garde films - because Hollywood cinema does give us pleasure. "We have (rightly) been wary", writes Kaplan, "... of admitting the degree to which the pleasure comes from identification with objectification". However, the answer might lie in trying to understand why we find it pleasurable at all. "So why then", writes Kaplan about feminists' reaction to mainstream film, "... are we drawn to it? Why do we find our objectification and surrender pleasurable?" (Kaplan, 1983:26).

In order to answer this question, one needs to accept that the categorisation of people as male or female is not a simple one. We have seen that Copjek criticised the centrality of the phallus to psychoanalytic theory, claiming that it fails to provide a theory of women's autonomous symbolic representation because it excludes the woman's body. However, it is of greater use to understand the phallus as a sign that belongs to culture rather than nature, and to say that it is itself the sign of the law of sexual division. Penley writes of the "law of the phallus" in these terms:

... each subject, male or female, must take up positions in relation to the phallus - which is not of a natural bodily order. In this respect, the most significant insight of psychoanalysis is the theoretical evidence it brings to bear against any notion of "natural" sexual identity (Penley, 1989:76).

Riley explains that sexual difference is an ideological battleground which consists of a range of "... discourses and meanings centring on biological sex, social gender, gender identity and sexual object choice" (Riley, 1988:35). A unitary, fixed and unproblematic sense of oneself as male or

female is something, which is constantly renegotiated and reaffirmed. It does not exist prior to the construction of subjectivity (Kuhn, 1990:16).

With this in mind, I think one must look closely at the way in which classical realist cinema is seen to feminise the screen and to masculinize spectatorial positions. It is important to find a way in which the "feminised" screen is not equated with the female subject, while the masculinized" spectatorial positions is conflated with the male subject, since these are also constructed subject-positions. One does not always watch film "as a woman". Riley points out that for a woman's identity to be completely defined by her gender would be intensely restrictive:

Can anyone fully inhabit a gender without a degree of horror? How could someone 'be a woman' through and through, make a final home in that classification without suffering claustrophobia? To lead a life soaked in the passionate consciousness of one's gender at every single moment, to be a sex with a vengeance - these are impossibilities, and far from the aims of feminism (Riley, 1988:6).

Earlier in this chapter I referred to the way in which the narrative of classical realist film is provided by an acknowledgement of the "difficulty" of the feminine, and in the end resolved by the denial of that difficulty. The "masculine" spectatorial position is viewed as the "norm" of gendered subjectivity. At the same time, cinema is geared towards reaffirming masculine identity through its contemplation/denial of the "problem" of womanhood. I think that such a theorisation of cinema is very valuable. It is only of value, however, if one adds that such films offer a space in which the subject can gain access to the contradictions within feminine identity. This could simply be an indication that the illusionary coherence of that identity is so precarious that the subject's identification with it needs to be constantly renegotiated. The re-negotiation of the subject's identification with the feminine occurs within a contained space (because of the final narrative closure), which does not threaten but rather acts to reaffirm the patriarchal structuring of the cinematic apparatus. Spectatorial pleasure is therefore not simply about "ease of plenitude", but is the field within which that plenitude is negotiated. Women's "masochistic" pleasure is not "false"; it is a way of exploring the contradictions within which they live. However, much we would want to renounce this pleasure, there is a need for feminist film practices that "... at once construct woman as spectator without offering the repressive identifications of Hollywood films and that satisfy our craving for pleasure" (Kaplan, 1983:25).

Within the metaphor of the bachelor machine, the illusionism of realist cinema is only understood as a manipulation of the viewer. This approach does not acknowledge the viewer's participation in the construction of that illusion. In light of the arguments put forward in this chapter, I would argue it is important to emphasise that the realism of mainstream film is established only because viewers choose to "suspend disbelief". This notion acknowledges the agency of the viewer within the construction of meaning is acknowledged. Such an approach

would, I believe, necessarily lead to an emphasis on the specific and located viewing experience.

Here, one can claim the spectatorial relation as a site of political resistance rather than one of submission to the bachelor machine.

It is necessary to ask why this emphasis is not found within the feminist film theory I have discussed. In the next chapter, I will attempt to answer this question by looking at the way in which film theory is positioned within contemporary feminist debates about sexuality.

## SEXUALITY, VIOLENCE AND VISUAL MEDIA

### Some Feminist Debates

What should political activism around sex look like? ... Do we favour the constraints of some kind of sexual expression? Do we have any concept of a sexual "public good"? Or, if we advocate a more libertarian position (anything goes, as long as all parties consent) what are the limits of consent? At what point does libertarianism shade into a laissez-faire position that posits, as it does in the realm of wage labor, a theoretical free choice with which abstractly equal individuals bargain and contract in the sexual marketplace? Do we gain more autonomy from saying "yes" or saying "no" in a grossly unequal world? (Snitow, 1983:31).

Chapter 1 explained that feminism does not constitute a methodology; instead it offers a frame of reference. Tools for analysing film from such a perspective can thus be drawn from methods of cultural analysis outside the sphere of feminism itself. It was argued, further, that a feminist perspective can transform such tools as analysis into cultural criticism compelling enough to play an important role in changing society. We saw that this power of feminist cultural criticism derives from its emphasis on women. This emphasis enables feminist cultural criticism to act as a "language of possibility" - that is, one which makes social change possible. The profoundly contradictory interpellation of women within social relations allows one to see women as a historically constructed collectivity. This revelation, in turn, leads to the realisation that it is possible to change the relations in which women live. We saw, however, that the feminist film analysis discussed in this chapter has failed to make full use of this potential.

My critique of film theory is informed by the realisation that political practice motivated by the need for resistance to an ideological hegemony must take account of, and be affirmative of, individual agency. In terms of its approach to the audiences of cinema, feminist film theory has failed to meet this condition. It does not adequately address the role played by viewers in both resisting and reinforcing the ideological operation of film. Because of this, it cannot take advantage of the crucial role that viewers could play as active participants in a feminist intervention into the operation of mass media. This, I argue, is one of the reasons why feminist film theory does not have much power as a form of intervention into the ideological operation of mainstream media.

Chapter 1 explored this disregard for the power of viewers by evaluating the

conceptual apparatus and proposals of film theory. I suggested that one should reformulate the theorisation of agency versus structure in film theory in a way that would affirm the existence of active spectators. It seems to me, however, that this task cannot be achieved by simply "correcting" some of the axioms of feminist film theory. The disregard for the political agency of viewers within such theory is, I would suggest, not a mistake or oversight; it represents, rather, a calculated choice. In order to address the weakness I have identified within this approach one would, therefore, need to gain some understanding of the motivations leading to its formulation. These motivations can, I think, only be fully understood within a wider context of feminist debate. In light of this, it seems valuable to explore some of the positions found within feminist film theory in relation to this wider context.

This next chapter argues that the approach to viewers within film theory is indicative of an essentialist understanding of identity within feminist debates as a whole. It will be shown that this essentialism operates as a response to categories of difference between women - such as those of race and sexuality. It operates, more specifically, as a way of smoothing over these differences. We saw that, because of its emphasis on women, a feminist perspective can transform tools of analysis into a powerful form of social criticism. It would seem, now, that differences between women threaten the cohesion of this position of resistance. I will argue, however, that, as in the specific case of film theory, this smoothing over of differences is necessarily accompanied by a disregard for individual agency, and therefore weakens feminist frameworks of analysis. It is, in fact, this response to categories of difference which explains the inadequacy of the approach to the viewer within film theory.

The chapter focuses on a category of difference which is particularly relevant to the concerns of this thesis, namely that of sexuality. It is relevant, firstly, because my evaluation of film theory concentrates on the issue of spectatorial pleasure. Film theorists understand such pleasure as a site in which the interpellation of the viewer happens not only in terms of gender but also of sexual identity. An evaluation of feminist approaches to sexual identity would therefore be relevant here. I will show that in terms of its rejection of spectatorial pleasure film theory is informed by the approach, within feminist sexuality debates, to women's positions as subjects of desire. The sexuality debates are also relevant to my attempt to establish whether feminist film theory can play a valuable role within programmes of resistance to violence against women. The post-60's feminist sexuality debates are directly informed by concerns about the prevalence of such violence. I will show that the approach to

spectatorial pleasure in film can be better understood in the context of these concerns.

Particular attention will be paid to the strand of the sexuality debates dealing with media, i.e. the pornography debate. We will see that this debate is deeply concerned about the role of media in reproducing power relations which give rise to sexual violence against women. It will be shown that, in terms of its approach to pornography, film theory seems to be in direct conflict with the sexuality debates. I will then show that film theory nevertheless has not escaped the assumptions on which these debates are based. Through an exploration of these assumptions, I identify ways in which film theory needs to reformulate its approach to spectatorial pleasure. I focus, here, on the implications for the application of film theory to the discussion of violence against women.

## **The relation between film theory and the sexuality debates**

### **Feminist film theory and the critique of pornography**

The early sociological models of feminist film theory as well as later psychoanalytic and semiotic theorisation do not single out pornography for special treatment. Instead, they prioritise a critique of the "everyday" presence of women's oppression through media representation. This approach must, I think, be understood as a challenge to conservative arguments - such as that of the law - which regarded (and still regards) pornography as qualitatively different from other ways of representing sexuality. Legal discourse sees pornography as "... socially pathological, or at least as exceptional, and therefore as containable by legal sanction..." (Kuhn, 1990:115). Wilson explains that feminist critiques of the media, in contrast, are all-inclusive, and that "... everything about the way in which our society depicts women was up for grabs and explicit images were only one part of this (Wilson, 1988:13). In this way, they challenge non-feminist discourse which tended to "pathologise" pornography - which, in other words, view the oppression of women through media representation as the exception to the rule. They argue, rather, that pornography occupies one point on a continuum of representations. While the focus of legislation was directed at hard-core pornography, feminist media analysis tends to be concentrated on soft-core, and on a "... continuum along which are also situated such commonly available and highly socially visible representations as advertisements" (Kuhn, 1990:114). The latter generated as much protest from feminism as hard-core pornography. "For the statement



'pornography is part of everyday sexism'", writes Beverley Brown, "... it is the everyday which is perhaps more galling than the exotic" (Brown, 1981:6). Here it is suggested that there is a logical continuation between the veneration of female beauty in cinema and the depiction of women as objects of sexual violence in pornography.

This attitude to pornography can be said to be in direct opposition to that of recent feminist sexuality debates. Lynne Segal comments that these discussions "... keep reducing to the question of pornography" (Segal, 1992:2) and that this question "... dogged and divided Western feminism like no other ... the issue of pornography just won't go away" (1). Carol Bacchi writes that "the sexuality debates (of the 1980's and early 90's) resolve around pornography and what to do about it..." (Bacchi, 1990:204). I would argue, however, that feminist film theory nevertheless shares some of the assumptions of these discussions. This becomes clear when one compares the theorisation of female spectatorial pleasure to the approach, within sexuality debates, to female sexual desire.

## **Feminist sexuality debates and the rejection of pleasure**

### **Early debates: the affirmation of female sexual desire**

During the 1960's and 70's, feminist sexuality debates were geared towards affirming women's existence as sexual subjects. Barbara Ehrenreich writes that feminists "... contested the idea that sex was a "microcosm of male dominance and female passivity" and thus proof of the naturalness of patriarchal relations (Ehrenreich et al., 1986:69). These feminist debates proposed a view of sexuality which emphasised the notion of active female sexual pleasure. Beatrix Campbell, for example, wrote that women should appropriate traditionally male sexual characteristics of agency, rather than passive female roles, since "... acknowledgement of lust, acceptance of so-called promiscuity must be recognised as potentially inevitable stages of women's escape from sexual conformity" (Campbell, 1974:108).

This call was intended to win women equality as sexual beings. With sexual desires and needs equal to those of men, they could no longer merely be defined as the object of male sexual desire. Feminists chose to base this affirmation of women's power as sexual subjects in the existence of a biologically determined female sexuality: their appropriation of traditionally male characteristics took the form of a claim for the "sameness" of women's bodies to those of men. In arguing for this sameness they assumed, furthermore, that

dominant notions about sexuality can only be countered by means of scientific "proof". They proposed a set of "truths" about the body which showed that women's sexual desires were not essentially different from those of men. Important political leverage for their claim of "sameness" was found in a new body of "objective" scientific findings - studies begun by Alfred Kinsey and "... ushered in definitely by Masters and Johnson's scientific "discovery" of the female orgasm in 1966" (Williams, 1990:171). Within these arguments, feminists were assuming that reference to pre-social biological forces was an adequate way of legitimising or challenging social relations.

This biologically deterministic approach to sexuality did, in fact, offer a particularly compelling way of challenging dominant social norms. Its power can be traced, I would submit, to the fact that the feminists took up an understanding of sexuality basic to dominant approaches to the subject, and appropriated it for their own purposes. According to this traditional view, sexuality is a powerful natural force which must be constantly restricted and shaped by social rules, such as those of marriage. This "truth" about sexuality is now simply turned back on itself, becoming a call for the liberation of a natural, pre-social force of a suppressed female sexuality from the restrictions of male-centred practices. This is, clearly, a simplistic understanding of the "radical changes" which were taking place. These changes were rooted in much older feminist struggles, and their concepts of gendered identity, sexuality, the body and the social were informed by this history. These concepts were, furthermore, still implicated in understandings of society which perpetuated the oppression of people as gendered subjects. The idea of sexual "liberation", for example, is based in a belief in an essential sexuality which merely needs to be set free. It does not take account of the power relations within which even "liberated" sexuality remains.

This approach held advantages for feminist social criticism. By approaching, from a dominant ideology, a concept which has become widely recognised as a "truth" about sexuality, these feminist debates were able to formulate a compelling form of criticism. In doing so, the feminist rejection of a traditional view of sexuality must, however, remain complicit with that view. The two supposedly antagonistic approaches to sexuality can, in fact, be seen to support each other. Such a challenge to dominant approaches to sexuality does not have the power to transform them. The call for a "sexual liberation" is, in other words, greatly limited in its ability to initiate social change.

During the early 1980's, distinct shifts took place within feminist politics generally. In the previous chapter, I referred to a statement by Sheridan, which describes these change:

[There was a] major shift in feminist politics generally, from a preoccupation

with describing and denouncing sexism while celebrating an already constituted femininity to a concern with intervening into the processes by which 'women' is constructed so that women are socially exploited and the feminine culturally devalued (Sheridan, 1988:2).

Within feminist approaches to sexuality, such a shift should, I think, have taken the form of a move away from the focus on the suppressed power of female sexuality to a realisation that the "truth" of sexuality is constructed within power relations. In the section below, I will illustrate how, despite the shifts within feminist politics generally, developments within the sexuality debates did not, in fact, take this route.

### **Contemporary debates: censoring female sexual desire**

Carol Bacchi writes that, during the 1980's, a large faction of feminists began to dismiss the possibility of a "liberation" of women's sexuality within heterosexual relations. Feminists began to call for separatism - a separation of the women's movement from participation in a male-dominated society. They argued that relationships with men were essentially oppressive within a male-centred society. According to Bacchi, female sexuality was set up, during this time, as the symbol of a more caring and communitarian ethic than that of male sexuality (Bacchi, 1990:206). This could be seen as an attempt to create a space in which to escape from exploitative power relations of contemporary society. Segal's comments on this "ethic": referring to it as a "type of political lesbianism" which, she says, became the "sexual ideal" for one influential strand of feminism, in which "... women who make love to women are more likely to express their sexuality in a more equal way" (Segal, 1992:4). The rejection of participation in a male-dominated society functioned, then, as an escape from exploitative power relations.

However, feminists arguments seem to imply that this escape from power relations had to be based in a refusal of female sexual desires. The insistence on the "communitarian" operates, in fact, as a desexualization of women. The suggestion is that women's sexual identity is rooted in political choice, while male sexual identity is informed primarily by a natural, unconstricted desire. The "political" sexuality of women is defined, here, by the needs of the community while male sexuality is seen to be centred on the needs of the self. This opposition between the male sexual identity based in individual desire and a female sexual identity based on political choice is highly problematic. Within such a framework, it is assumed that "promiscuity" and "lust" (see Campbell's comment, above) are definitions of male sexuality while women's sexuality has less to do with self-centered desire. Sexual

desire, then, is seen as inherently male. Whereas, during the previous decade they had "... affirmed what they saw as the similarity between their own and men's sexuality", many feminists now said the opposite. They claimed that "? there is a fundamental difference between women's sexuality and men's, with women's sexuality once again the inverse of men's: gentle, diffuse and, above all, egalitarian" (4). In calling for separatism in these terms, feminist sexual politics was clearly no longer geared towards the creation of a space in which women could fulfil their potential as sexual subjects.

The pornography debate, which developed during this time, represents an important indication of this shift from the affirmation, to the silencing, of the expression of female sexual desire. It is, I would say, one of the most important examples of feminist struggles to place constraints on sexual expression. Webster describes the failure of the sexuality debate to fulfil its potential as an affirmation of women's right to express their desires in eloquent terms:

[Our] list of taboos marked off more and more unacceptable terrain. "Perverse" pleasures, like voyeurism, bondage, S/M, fetishism, pornography, promiscuity, and intergenerational, group, interracial, public or phone sex were presented as incomprehensible. As we disclaimed any identification with, or interest in, these fantasies and activities, that part of the pedestal, supposed to protect our innocence and ensure our purity, was rebuilt (Webster, 1984:386).

In contrast to the 1970's, feminists now questioned the celebration of female sexual desire altogether. Segal writes that during this period many feminists, in fact, stopped writing about female sexual desire altogether (Segal, 1992:4). In questioning the insistence on the liberation of an already-constituted female sexuality within earlier debates, the new tradition goes, then, to the opposite extreme, focusing only on women as object of male sexual desire. It could be argued that such analysis merely takes up the opposite component of a dualism which underpins both traditions.

Bacchi, in discussing these debates, points out that there has been opposition to the rejection of female sexual desire, although the dominant voices within the women's movement tried to silence such dissent. Hester Eisenstein expresses this opposition within feminist debate in eloquent terms:

There has been such bitterness over this. To me, the original strength of feminism was to open women's mouths and have women speak. Here the issue was in fact having the opposite effect. Rather than silencing the pornographer, feminists were silencing each other. I felt that was absolutely tragic... (Eisenstein, 1985:203).

Ruby Rich writes that the shifts within sexuality debates have produced " ... one of the worst

movement splits in recent times" (Rich, 1983:66).

### **Film theory and the sexuality debates**

Within discussions of sexuality, feminists are, it seems, unable to reject an essentialist understanding of identity. I would suggest that this inability explains the essentialist approach to spectatorial pleasure within film theory. As pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, film theorists understand such pleasure as a site in which the interpellation of the viewer happens not only in terms of gender but also sexual identity.

There are unquestionable similarities between the developments within the sexuality debates, and within the theorisation of spectatorial pleasure. Early sexuality debates criticised social structures by referring to the suppressed power of a pre-social female sexuality. Film theory referred, similarly, to "... some externally constructed criteria describing the fully autonomous, independent woman" (Kaplan, 1983:23). In both cases, this assumption was accompanied by an affirmation of women's desires: Paula Webster writes that, as feminists of the 1970's rallied to denounce media depictions of feminine desire and desirability, asserting that women "... did not want to look like that or be treated like that", it appeared that the women's movement was on the verge of "... suggesting what in fact [they] did want" (Webster, 1984:386). Both began to express a growing discomfort with an essentialist approach to identity-but did not dismiss this approach. We saw in Chapter 1 that film theory, like the feminist sexuality debate, responded to this discomfort by insisting on the establishment of an alternative feminist sphere-in the form of a "counter cinema", in which women could escape from these relations of power. As with the sexuality debates, this sphere would have to be based, as we saw, in a rejection of pleasure.

Given these similarities, I would argue that the rejection of spectatorial pleasure in film theory is informed by the approach, within feminist sexuality debates, to women's position as subjects of desire. An evaluation of the shifts within the sexuality debates could therefore contribute towards an understanding of the motivations behind the refusal of spectatorial pleasure. The section below explores more closely the response, within the sexuality debates, to the realisation that pleasure necessarily exists within power relations.

## Contextualising the shift from celebration to censorship: Women and the pleasure/danger dilemma

We have seen that intense struggles have developed within women's movements around the issue of pornography as well as that of separatism. They may usefully be understood within the context of what might be called the "pleasure/danger" dilemma. Bacchi explains the position of the so-called "pro-sex" group as a call for complete freedom of sexual expression, in which "all forms of sexual expression, including pornography and more exotic forms such as lesbian sadomasochism and butch/femme lesbian relationships, are acceptable ..." (Bacchi, 1990:204). She explains that their opponents, whom they dubbed "anti-sex" were concerned about the dangers of such expression. They "object to pornography and to sexual relationships which seem to incorporate displays of power, violence, or dominant/submissive roles" (204).

At the 1982 Bernard Conference on the "politics of sexuality", when the two sides of the sexuality debate engaged in open confrontation, the pornography issue was, significantly, the focus of discussion:

A coalition of anti-pornography feminist groups picketed and leafleted the conference, which had been advertised as a conference on "women's sexual pleasure, choice and autonomy". They called for a "boycott of speakers whose views on sexuality and alleged sexual practices they deemed unfeminist" (Freedman et al., 1984:103).

We see, here, a division between, on the one hand, the prioritisation of the expression of pleasure, and on the other concern about the danger of such expression. This division results, it would seem, from the tension women experience between trying to discover what sexual freedom means while fending off the image of sex object. Some feminist social criticism suggests, in fact, that when women make a claim for their position as sexual subjects, there often follows a backlash from the forces of patriarchy in which their position as objects of male sexual desire is reinforced. This argument implies that, for women, there is a causal link between, on one hand, expressing sexual desire and pleasure and, on the other, being defined as objects. This repercussion poses serious dangers to women, one of which is the threat of physical violence. The central claim of feminist anti-pornography campaigns is, in fact, that there is a direct link between the depiction of sex in pornography and the occurrence of violence against women in contemporary society (Rodgers, 1991:38). Ann Snitow writes that the anti-pornography movement "... partly derived from feminist efforts against misogynist violence - rape crisis centres and battered women's shelters" (Snitow, 1983:38).

Disquiet about the occurrence of violence against women has indeed had an especially

forceful impact on the sexuality debates. This concern with violence has, in particular, shaped feminist approaches to the issue of the expression, by women, of sexual pleasure and desire. As such, the tension between making a claim for one's position as sexual subject and fending off the image of sex object has created understandable conflict within feminism when dealing with the issue of sexuality. Bacchi describes the dilemma as follows:

There is a tension between a desire to rebel against a moralistic stereotype which has been used to constrain women's sexual activities and the knowledge that in society today women are sexually vulnerable ... How can women seek 'pleasure' in a society where sexuality poses for them explicit dangers...? (Bacchi, 1990:208).

Significantly, the point at which feminist sexuality debates veered away from a claim for the "sameness" of female sexual pleasure (see previous section) to a struggle between "pro-sex" and "ant-sex" factions, was also the point at which the focus of discussion shifted to this problem of violence against women (Segal, 1992:3). The second decade of contemporary Western feminism was, in fact, characterised by the "... increasing determination of that movement to understand and eliminate rape and violence against women" (3). Bacchi explains that the claim that women's sexuality was the same as that of men, and that they too were sexual subjects, was increasingly problematised by the fact that women continue to live in fear of sexual aggression. In a world where women's differential social location left them vulnerable, claiming "equality" was no easy matter (Bacchi, 1990:210).

It was, then, because of the struggle against violence that feminists turned to attempts to place constraints on some kinds of sexual expression. Snitow describes this dilemma within which feminist discussions of sexuality are caught:

What should political activism around sex look like? ... Do we favour the constraints of some kinds of sexual expression? Do we have any concept of a sexual "public good"? Or, if we advocate a more libertarian position (anything goes, as long as all parties consent) what are the limits of consent? At what point does libertarianism shade into a laissez-faire position that posits, as it does in the realm of wage labor, a theoretical free choice with which abstractly equal individuals bargain and contract in the sexual marketplace? Do we gain more autonomy from saying "yes" or saying "no" in a grossly unequal world? (Snitow, 1983:31).

### **Evaluating the pleasure/danger dilemma**

The relation between campaigns opposing pornography and those resisting violence against women is, however, troublesome. Some critics claim that the preoccupation with pornography has, in fact, diverted energies (and funding) away from practical interventions

into violence. Snitow, for example, criticises anti-pornography campaigns for focusing" ... not on real instances of violence against women but on sexual images the campaign activists consider to evoke violence" (Snitow, 1983:38). Elisabeth Wilson writes about this shift with great concern:

Where once women's groups battled to open a refuge for battered women or a rape crisis centre, they now mount campaigns against Hustler and Penthouse ... by far the most visible feminist activity from the late 1980's until now has been that supporting pornography (Wilson, 1992:16).

Some feminists are critical of this shift from "... struggles to change the world to struggles to change representations" (16). "Why" writes Snitow, "... has the struggle against sexual violence - which originally emphasised the politics of rape - taken such a symbolic turn" (Snitow, 1983:40).

I would question whether this "symbolic turn" indicates a shift from interventions into social relations to attempts to change representations. Furthermore, I doubt whether this turn trivialises struggles against violence. The pornography debates indicate, in fact, a conflation within feminist debates of representations of sexuality and violence and "real" acts of violence. Within many discussions, these two spheres of debate become inseparable. One can no longer, within such debates, clearly differentiate between the representation of violence and the violence of representation. The conflation is, I think, informed by some very important insights into the way in which gendered subjectivity is constructed. It indicates a recognition which has characterised feminist discussions since the early seventies - that cultural factors play a crucial role in the constitution of women's positions within social relations. This thesis, in fact, is based on a similar recognition - and revolves around a critique of frameworks within which one chooses either to address "real instances of violence" or to deal with "images". The problem with feminist campaigns around pornography lies, rather, with the way in which this relation between acts of violence and representations is understood.

I would identify two flaws in the understanding of this relation within these campaigns. Firstly, the rise in pornography is often viewed as an "index", or a reflection, of rising violence. Secondly, the relation between pornography and violence is seen as a causal one. These two notions often appear in combination, and, I would argue, are logically connected. They represent elements within a specific argument about the relation between pornography and violence; one could call this the "backlash" argument. Such arguments state that, from the 1980's onwards, there was a backlash against the rise of the women's



movement in the seventies: a backlash which included an increase of violence (and an increase in the threat of violence) against women. They also contend that this backlash is indexed by the increase of pornography. Vance writes, for example, that the anti-pornography movement often interprets the increase in pornography as an "... indicator of rising violence against women and a sign of backlash against feminism" (Vance, 1992:6). Within such discussions, the rise in pornography is, in other words, often viewed as more than an "index" of rising violence (and the rising threat of violence); pornography generates violence against women. Such debates emphasise that acts of violence occur because of the symbolic system within which we exist. The problem with the anti-pornography campaigns does not so much lie, in other words, with the convergence of image and reality, but with the deterministic nature of that conflation. Alice Echols writes, for example, of the argument that "pornography is the theory, rape the practice". It represents, she says, "? cultural feminism's contribution to the domino-theory of sexuality" and "? identifies pornography as the scourge which leads inexorably to violence against women" (Echols, 1984:59). Feminists have, Echols goes on to say, developed a "... highly mechanistic, behaviourist analysis that conflates fantasy with reality and pornography with violence" (59).

The two "flaws" within the backlash argument can be said to represent the two components of the essentialist dualism underpinning feminist media debates. The theorisation of media as a reflection of reality is, as we saw in Chapter 1, associated with the early, sociological tradition in media theory. The notion of a "causal" relation between pornography and violence can, on the other hand, be associated with psychoanalytic cinematic theory, in which the spectatorial position offered by a given text is unproblematically identified with the spectator. In this case, the voyeuristic/fetishistic spectatorial position of male aggressor is equated with historically placed male spectator - who rapes and batters because he has been exposed to pornography. This analysis of the backlash argument would support my contention that the divisions between these two traditions represent a dualism which underpins feminist approaches to sexuality in general.

A brief discussion of recent historical developments within heterosexual pornography reveals that the relation between feminist liberation and pornography may be interpreted in a way that is very different from that of the backlash argument. Linda Williams' description of such developments is of particular value to my discussion of this issue. She points out that heterosexual pornography contains few images of violence against women-but that its traditional narrative structure is nevertheless based in the notion of a "rape fantasy", in which

"? traditional, male-centered pornography's fondest fantasy is to insist on [women's consent to rape] by repeated representations of the rape that turns into ecstasy: ravishment" (Williams, 1990:164).

Williams goes on to argue that such films show women involuntarily enjoying rape because the confession of such pleasure clearly contradicts the "official moral rectitude" of women. She comments that "... pleasure of the woman in damning whether she experiences it with or against her will" (164). If, in these films, rape occurs against a woman's will, "... the drama of her conversion to consent ... vindicates (the male viewer's) desire to believe that what he enjoys, she enjoys" (165). The woman's pleasure vindicates, in the end, the man's coercion. Williams explains that by the early 1980's, such rape-fantasies began to reduce dramatically in hardcore narrative. Now, enjoyment-of-rape scenarios became increasingly unacceptable in an industry "? trying to expand its viewership and disassociate itself from the sleaze of stag" (16).

Williams writes that the change took place partly because of a heightened acceptance within this genre of the feminist critique of male sexual violence against women. This shift can be seen as a response to a feminist critique of gender violence. The backlash argument can, therefore, not be applied in a satisfactory manner to pornography in the eighties - and it was during this period, as we have seen, that the feminist anti-pornography movement was established.

Behaviourist analysis such as that of the backlash arguments leads, I think, to a denial of women's ability to resist oppression. Wilson writes, for example, that the focus on pornography, within feminist debates, has been accompanied by a far more simplistic understanding of women's sexuality:

[there is a shift from] the attempt to understand how we respond sexually as women and how we internalize oppressive notions of femininity and female sexual response, to a simpler position which lays the blame squarely on pornography for creating a climate of sexual violence and terrorizing women (Wilson, 1992:18).

Within this approach to sexuality, there is very little exploration of women's participation in the reproduction of views of sexuality which give rise to violence against women. Because of this, little attention is given to women's ability to resist the reproduction of such views.

In order to clarify this point, it is worth looking more closely at the dominant view of rape which feminist debates contest. This view could be said to be based on two assumptions- both of which feminist debates challenge. Firstly, according to this view, rape is rape only if

the woman can be said to hold no responsibility for being abused.<sup>11</sup> Feminists challenge the double standard of such beliefs, insisting that women should not be held responsible for the sexual crimes committed against them. Dominant representations of rape (such as that of the law and that of visual media) are criticised by implying such a responsibility. The second assumption made within dominant views of rape is that the responsibility of the "victim" for the crime committed against her can be established by determining whether she took any pleasure from being raped. Traditionally, then, the crime of rape only becomes a crime on the level of mental states. Francis Ferguson points out that rape is rape " ... only if the victim does not consent to the sexual act performed on her or him" (Ferguson, 1987:91). It would seem, furthermore, that here women who are raped are often assumed "guilty" until proven "innocent". Williams comments, in fact, that rape is the crime that "most doubts the veracity of its victims". We have seen that this attitude underpinned the narrative structure of mainstream heterosexual pornography until the end of the seventies. Since rape was presented in this way in many of the dominant discourses of society, feminists were contesting what Williams refers to as the "... classic dilemma of rape in a sexist society", i.e. the "suspicion that the victim wants to be victimised, a suspicion that has made rape notoriously difficult to probe in courts of law ... (Williams, 1990:164). Feminist countered the approach which held women responsible for sexual crimes committed against them by insisting that women did not enjoy being raped.

One could, in fact, argue that this public discussion by feminists of female sexual pleasure-and, more specifically, the denial of pleasure - meant that acts of sexual violence against women were becoming "more visible". Mainstream cinema was faced with what Williams refers to in her discussion of pornography as the "... unspecified desires of females who might not wish to be consumed objects and who certainly did not wish to be ravished or raped" (161). Cinematic reactions to feminist discussions of pleasure were a reaction to the feminist denial of pleasure. This reaction was, I would say, an attempt to incorporate the visibility of rape (resulting from this denial of pleasure) into the patriarchal discourse of mainstream cinema and heterosexual pornographic film. If the representations of rape in mainstream film function as a struggle to accommodate this visibility within patriarchal discourse, then it may be that this struggle includes an attempt to contain this refusal of female pleasure of rape. The shifts within heterosexual pornography away from the "rape fantasy" as well as the increase in images of rape in mainstream cinema can therefore

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<sup>11</sup> According to the dominant view in society, only women and children can be raped. This view has, for

arguably be seen as a reaction to the feminist denial of pleasure. This adaptation of feminist definitions of sexual violence within visual media can clearly not be accommodated within the "backlash" argument.

It seems necessary, then, to develop an alternative to the "backlash" argument. I would suggest that, in doing so, it is important to break down the opposition between an emphasis on the inherent virtue of all sexual expression and an assertion that the expression of "true" female pleasure cannot occur within patriarchal power relations. Discussions of pornography and violence, for example, create such an opposition between the feminist appropriation of female pleasure and a concern with danger. Carol Vance notes that the net effect of the argument that the increase in pornography is an indicator of "rising violence against women and a sign of backlash against feminism" is to "... suggest that women are less sexually safe than ever and that discussions of explorations of pleasure are better deferred to a safer time" (Vance, 1992:6).

The opposition between the expression of female pleasure and violent patriarchal backlash can be seen, in fact, as an internalisation of the way in which women's sexuality has been defined, over the last century, by means of a differentiation between "good" and "bad" women. This differentiation offers women a very limited set of choices. Bacchi remarks that the problem with feminist theorisation of sexuality seems to be that women have to "choose" between freedom and security, between individual self-actualisation and community support (Bacchi, 1990:208). In reality, no such choice exists. Irene Philipson comments, similarly, that in a society characterised by male domination it is impossible to "... want just freedom, on the one hand, or just protection, on the other" (Phillipson, 1984:118). Frances Olsen writes that, in conditions of sexual inequality, women "... are oppressed by both sexual freedom and societal control of sexuality". Feminists, she urges, should be devising strategies to overcome both forms of oppression rather than argue about which is worse—social control of women's sexuality or male sexual exploitation (Olsen, 1984:430). To focus only on pleasure and gratification, Vance explains, "... ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act", while opting for the opposite pole of dualism is equally restrictive, since "... to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women's experience with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live" (Vance, 1984:1).

It is of course true that, beyond the actual physical or psychological harm done to

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example, been built into the definitions of rape that forms part of the legislation.

victims of sexual violence, the threat of sexual attack serves as a powerful reminder of male privilege, constraining women's movement and behaviour. Vance points out, however, that the cultural mythology surrounding sexual violence "... provided a unique and powerful route for it to work its way into the heart of female desire":

If female sexual desire triggers male attack, it cannot be freely or spontaneously shown, either in public or in private. Instead, female desire should be restricted to zones protected and privileged in the culture: traditional marriage and the nuclear family (3).

What is required, then, is a theory of the subject which avoids setting up "free will" and "victim status" as choices which stand in diametric opposition to each other.

I would argue that concern about violence against women, within the sexuality debates, does not in itself logically lead to these conflicts within feminist movements around the affirmation of women as sexual subjects. This struggle is caused, rather, by an essential approach to the nature of sexuality. Bacchi describes the essentialism within the sexuality in terms of "two camps" which reify "male" and "female" sexuality and "fail to appreciate the ways in which sexuality is an historically culturally specific construct" (Bacchi, 1990:216). They do, of course, reify these sexualities differently. The "anti-sex" group "... sees two separate essences: a male essence which is aggressive and a female essence which is placid and benign" (216). The "pro-sex" group, on the other hand, "... poses, by implication if not directly, a common human sexual essence (sameness) which ought to be liberated" (217). Bacchi points out that this tendency recalls the ideas of the 60's "sexual liberationists" who tended to argue as if more sex was itself progressive and liberating (Wilson, 1992:27). This could be an indication that the arguments around separatism, pornography and the rejection of female desire shares the dualistic approach to sexuality of earlier debates. Like feminist film theory, the sexuality debate could be said to veer back and forth between the two poles of this dualism: the notion of sexual desire as essentially oppressive to women and the essentialist response which argues that sex in itself is liberating.

Wilson comments that this essentialism is surprising, since both sides are familiar with social construction theory. In fact, she comments, "... the social construction of sexuality which sees sexual behaviour, like other behaviour as shaped and determined by cultural rather than biological forces is a starting point for any feminist analysis of sexuality" (Wilson, 1992:136). Bacchi makes a similar point and states that each group tends to apply this theory to their opponents rather than to themselves. This, she argues is why "... both lapse into positions which are closer to essentialism" (Bacchi, 1990:213).

Wilson's suggests that speaking of sexual behaviour as "shaped and determined by cultural rather than biological forces" represents a viable alternative to these approaches. This is, however, questionable. The flaw within the pornography debates can be found, rather, within the recognition that sexual behaviour is determined by cultural rather than biological forces. This recognition does not represent a radical analysis of sexual behaviour, since it clearly fails to question the opposition between the cultural and the biological. The weakness within feminist analysis of sexuality is not, I would say, the emphasis on a patriarchal repression of female pleasure. It is, rather, that such repression is understood in terms of a framework within which the expression of female sexual pleasure is seen to be in opposition to patriarchal oppression - and, more specifically, in opposition to male sexual violence.

I would restate Wilson's commentary by saying that the essentialism within these debates might seem surprising, since the starting point for any feminist analysis is a realisation that "women" is a historically constructed collectivity, and that the meaning of this construct is constantly renegotiated. In the previous chapter, we saw that Riley argued for such an insistence, describing "Women" as an "unstable category" - an instability that has a historical foundation, with feminism as the "? site of the systematic fighting-out of that instability - which need not worry us" (Riley, 1988:5).

In order to understand why the debates discussed here nevertheless fall back on an essentialist approach, it must be remembered that, in the context of sexual identity, this "fighting-out" of instabilities also occurs within women's movements. Internal struggles around the "meaning" of sexuality have existed in the contemporary women's movements since their establishment in the 1960's. Within this context, an "insistence on women as an unstable category" might seem threatening to the coherence of feminist frameworks since it points to power struggle between women. The essentialism of these early debates could be said to operate to obscure the fact of these internal struggles. The emergence in the 1980's of a call for separatism and the development of the pornography debates can be seen as an indication that the divisions within women's movements were becoming too extreme to be smoothed over. The pro-sex/anti-sex debates operate, I would submit, as an expression of these struggles. These debates were, nevertheless, still couched in an essentialist language and, as such, their political nature could still be obscured. Linda Williams makes this point:

[Feminists] cannot see that the two main sides in the debates about pornography - the one that sees sexuality as the source of our problems, and the one that sees sexual liberation as the beginning of a solution - are just as much part of the compulsion to talk about an essential, self-evident sexual "truth" as is

pornography itself (Williams, 1990:14-15).

In the section below, I will attempt to illustrate how the essentialism of feminist approaches to sexuality operated to smooth internal divisions.

### **The threat of difference**

Segal's description of the idealisation of lesbianism within feminist politics is, in fact, rather crude. It is simplistic to say that lesbianism itself operated within the women's movement as a denial of female desire. Snitow, in contrast, reminds us that lesbian feminism rose, in the seventies, from the insistence on women's right to be sexual. She comments that, like early discussions of masturbation within women's liberation, the "revelation that lesbianism was a possible alternative demonstrated that women could make a sexual life for themselves, not only privately-as auto-eroticism-but together" (Snitow, 1983:29). Because of the recent "desexualized" image of lesbianism, this is easy to forget. Snitow suggests that the rise of separatism included, in fact, an "unsexing" of lesbianism by the women's movement as a whole (Snitow, p.33). Alice Echols makes a similar statement about this, commenting that the "homophobia, and, to a lesser extent, the anti-sex attitude within certain elements of the movement precluded lesbian feminists from promoting lesbianism as a sexual rather than a political choice" (Echols, 1984:54). In this way feminists could stress the similarity between lesbian and heterosexual feminists, and suppress tensions which threatened the coherence of the women's movement (Snitow, 1983:33).

Struggle around the coherence of the second wave women's movement did not, in fact, begin in the eighties; they were present from the beginning. Bacchi writes, for example, that, during the 1970's, there were already serious divisions within the movement over the "lesbian issue" and that the "gay/straight split of the 1970's created problems for the movement which have never gone away, problems which lie behind the current sexuality debates (Bacchi, 1990:211). These divisions have far-reaching implications for the women's movement, informing arguments about theory and practice. They have, she explains, to do with "conflicting beliefs about the ultimate cause of women's oppression, the relationship between sexuality and gender, and strategic decisions about the movement's priorities" (211).

The tolerance towards lesbians in the 1970's did not resolve these divisions. Snitow writes that the sense of unanimity within the women's movement was an illusion. They "rode the crest of a wave of optimism, a moment when feminism had not yet faced a critical confrontation with the knottier questions of erotic desire and pleasure" (Snitow, 1983:35).

The terms of this reconciliation within the women's movement, writes Echols, have therefore ensured that "... suspicion and acrimony would be preserved, though often below the surface" (Echols, 1984:56). The feminist refusal of female pleasure which took place in the 1980's was, therefore, not in contradiction to the earlier phase of the sexuality debate. Its origins can be found, rather, in the essentialism of those earlier debates.

These developments can be equated, according to Echols, with the rise of cultural feminism, which, she explains, polarises male and female sexuality. Male sexuality becomes demonised while female sexuality is idealised. Cultural feminism equates women's liberation with the nurturance of a female counter-culture which, it is hoped, will display dominant "male" culture (Echols, 1984:56). The development of this tradition illustrates the contradictory nature of feminist acceptance of a radical theory of sexuality. On the one hand, it emphasises the socially constructed nature of sexualised identity. At the same time, however, it clearly reverts to a biologically deterministic concept of sexuality. Echols writes that it was with the rise of this strand of feminism that relations between lesbian and heterosexual feminists became more cordial, as lesbianism became desexualised. By the end of the 1970's cultural feminism had achieved hegemony within the women's movement (Echols, 1984:56).

The struggle for lesbian visibility was a threat to the coherence of a movement based in gendered identity; it pointed towards the fact that the body necessarily exists as a social construction. However, the smoothing over of these struggles did not preserve the strength of feminist frameworks of analysis; it operated, rather, as a dismissal of women's ability to be agents of resistance. The idealisation of lesbian relationships did not only desexualise lesbianism, but women's sexuality in general; it contained an implicit denial of female sexual desire since it was equated with loving generosity, while male sexuality was equated with lust. These attempts to create an alternative feminine voice, which escapes from power relations, only weakened feminist critiques of sexual relations. Some feminist theorists have pointed out that in order to assert themselves within social relations, lesbian women need reclaim their right to sexual pleasure:

Women - especially lesbians - exist under conditions that make us frightened to step out of line, frightened to challenge the status quo, almost unable to imagine what bold and brassy, peacock creatures we could be if we were free. Lesbian culture is impoverished. And if we are ever going to be free, we must have a vision of that woman of the future, including her ideas about what "sexy" means and looks like, and what "pleasure" is, and what it's worth (Califer, 1982:14).

The fact that debates around pornography have been rooted in the issue of censorship gives



some clue to their importance to feminist concerns about violence. It indicates an awareness that the presence of violence against women is inseparable from struggles to control the symbolic system within which we exist. This awareness forms, I think, part of a recognition which characterised the women's movement - that cultural factors play a crucial role in the constitution of women's positions within social relations. Feminist social criticism is, after all, defined by its focus on "women" as a socially constructed category of gender. So, the focus on censorship forms part of an admirable attempt by feminists to gain a measure of control within struggles around the public expression of ideas about sexuality.

The censorship of pornography will not, however, in itself lead to a decrease in violence against women. Intervention into the struggle over meaning will only be in the interest of feminism if it is motivated by an attempt to make the oppression of women become more visible, or acknowledged, within society. Struggles within the symbolic determine the degree to which the presence of acts of violence against women is acknowledged. Such an approach would lead the feminist campaigns around visual media to prioritise a struggle for access to the construction of meaning. Struggles over the meaning of sexuality have implications for the degree to which violence against women becomes visible, or acknowledged, within society - and therefore for the possibility to address the existence of such violence.

It is, I think, possible to incorporate such an approach to sexuality into feminism without jeopardising its coherency. This could be done by arguing that pleasure in the eroticisation of male-centred power relations is not simply "false" for women. It offers, instead, a site of struggle, within which they can negotiate their positions within those power relations. In the last section of this chapter, I will apply such an approach to an evaluation of the role of film analysis as a form of feminist resistance to violence against women.

### **The role of film theory within feminist resistance to violence against women**

At the beginning of this chapter, we saw that the approach to media within feminist film theory appears to be in conflict with that of the sexuality debates. The latter focuses exclusively on the political role of pornography, and as such tends to "pathologise" the oppression of women through media representation. Such oppression is not, in other words, regarded as widespread and "normal" to society-an aspect of the media we see around us every day. Film theory, on the other hand, prioritises a critique of the "everyday" presence of women's oppression through media representation. Here, we saw, it is suggested that

there is a logical continuity between the veneration of female beauty in cinema and the depiction of women as objects of sexual violence in hard core pornography (Kuhn, 1982:6). I would suggest that it is in the relation drawn between veneration and violation that we can perceive the shared assumptions of film theory and the sexuality debates.

Two books mentioned in the previous chapter are of particular relevance here. The first is Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape*, cited in Chapter 1 as one of the first books published within the sociological tradition. The second is *Women in Film*, in which Kaplan responds to Haskell's argument, restating it within a psychoanalytic framework. Haskell outlines a series of changes in the depiction of women in mainstream cinema, pointing out the development of two cycles of films in the 1970's: one ("male buddy" films) in which women were excluded altogether, and a second in which, significantly, women were depicted as objects of sexual violence. Such films clearly take a very different approach to the representation of women than the veneration of the feminine found in earlier films. Haskell argues that these shifts are responses to a "radical cultural change" set in motion by the women's movement, in which women began to take possession of their own sexuality. The increase of images of violence against women was a reaction to newly found sexual expressiveness amongst women - an attempt to contain the threat that female desire poses to patriarchy (Haskell, 1973:3).

Kaplan traces a similar series of shifts within the history of classical realist film, repeating Haskell's account of an increase in images of violence against women - especially those of rape - in post-60's films. She restates Haskell's explanation of this shift in terms of a psychoanalytic framework, looking at the way in which the viewer is positioned as a gendered spectator within the cinematic apparatus. In keeping with Mulvey's Freudian theorisation of cinema, she asserts that fetishism "... builds up the physical beauty of the object, turning it into something satisfying in itself", while voyeurism has the opposite effect: "Voyeurism, linked to disparagement, has a sadistic side and is involved with the pleasure through control or domination and with punishing women (guilty for being castrated)" (Kaplan, 1983:5). Kaplan looks at a series of classical realist films from the thirties to the seventies, discussing these with reference to the psychoanalytic concept of the "male gaze", which, "by carrying with it social, political and economic as well as sexual power, relegates women to absence ... using a series of increasingly vicious mechanisms" (5). She explains the shift from the denial of female desire through the "adoring" male gaze of fetishisation to a domination of the new sexual women by the phallus "... as a way of man asserting control over (their) newly found

sexual expressiveness" (7).

The assertion made by Haskell and Kaplan that there is a connection between veneration and violation is, I think, of great value to explanations of the representation of women within classical realist cinema in general. The way in which one draws the connection needs, however, to be carefully considered. Above all, one must avoid making use of essential notions of gender and sexuality - which, I consider, are present within both authors' discussions. It is here that their arguments share the essentialist approach to sexual identity of the feminist pornography debate. They make use of the "backlash" argument, mentioned earlier in my discussion of the sexuality debates, explaining the increase in images of rape in mainstream visual media as a wrathful response of the "liberation" of female sexuality that took place during the seventies.

In taking up Haskell's "sociological" study and restating it in terms of a psychoanalytic framework, Kaplan leaves the relation drawn between media and violence virtually unchanged. Both books argue that the veneration of female beauty and violation of women's bodies in cinema have the same function: to depict women as objects for the consumption of a male audience. They agree that media representations of women as objects of male sexual desire operate as an extension of, or even a counterpart to, the representation of women as the objects of male sexual violence. They agree, furthermore, that the representation of women's bodies in cinema tends to operate as different ways of containing the threat that the public expression of female sexual desire poses to patriarchal relations of power. This agreement is surprising, since the theoretical traditions represented by the respective books hold conflicting views on the theorisation of visual media. The agreement becomes understandable, however, if one accepts the argument put forward in the previous chapter that the two traditions share a dualistic theorisation of agency versus structure. It is this dualism which must be addressed in order to come to grips with the essentialist understanding of gendered identity employed above.

We saw that, in questioning the concept of "real" women within sociological theories, psychoanalytic theory goes to the opposite extreme by equating "real" women with women as objects of the "male gaze". We say, furthermore, that when feminists then responded by trying to re-introduce the female body into film theory, that they were simply returning to the first pole of this dualism. The changes within feminist film theory can be described, then, as veering between opposite poles of the dualism of agency versus structure.

I would argue that the backlash argument, in its perception of the relation between the

public expression by women of pleasure and desire, and the depiction of women as objects of sexual violence in mainstream cinema, is rooted in this dualism. According to the backlash argument, agency (in the form of women's public expression of an autonomous sexual identity) is ruthlessly eliminated by the bachelor machine of contemporary society. The backlash argument can be seen to take up what I describe above as the second pole of the dualism between agency and structure.

In the previous section of this chapter, I presented a critique of the backlash argument as it is represented in the sexuality debates as a whole. This critique can also be applied to the backlash argument for an analysis of mainstream cinema. One can argue, for example, that by "breaking the silence", feminists saw to it that violence against women became more openly acknowledged by dominant ideology. They had, during the 1970's, succeeded in making public previously unmentionable activities like rape. Because of this, the occurrence of such acts of violence had become much more visible - more acknowledged. The increase in images of violence could be seen as a way of accommodating this visibility within the dominant discourses about gender and sexuality which underpin mainstream cinema. Even in the instance of these films, then, the backlash argument is unsatisfactory.

Kaplan and Haskell's recognition of the "unprecedented number of films in the early 1970's showing women being raped" (Kaplan, 1983:5) is an important one. To say, however, that the increase in images of violence against women was a reaction to women's appropriation of their own sexuality is simplistic. One could argue, instead, that the increase in images of rape are not necessarily a way of regaining control over "newly found sexual expressiveness"; it could be seen as a logical continuation of that expressiveness. Although the increase in images of sexual violence in mainstream cinema might be a response to the public discussion by feminists of female sexual pleasure, this reaction did not simply take the form of a violent backlash to counter the liberation of women from sexual oppression. Both forms of expression (that of mainstream cinema and that of feminist film theory) are part, rather, of a struggle over the further institutionalisation of the meaning of sexuality.

This thesis focuses, in proposing a way of moving beyond the dualism of agency versus structure, on Mulvey's discussion of spectatorial pleasure. According to my argument, the merging of "real women" with the "object of the male gaze" became, in Mulvey's case, a lack of differentiation between "pleasure" in the illusionism of cinema and the "ease of plenitude" of this illusionism. By making this equation, Mulvey discards the possibility of feminist spectatorial position as a strong point of resistance. Spectatorial

pleasure cannot, here, be a feminist tool of resistance - and the "pleasure of resistance" cannot be a spectatorial pleasure. It has been suggested in Chapter 1 that pleasure in the illusionism of such film should instead be explained in terms of a viewer's willing "suspension of disbelief". This argument affirms the existence of active spectators who take part in the construction of meaning of a film. It opens the possibility of feminist spectatorial positions, and of the appropriation of spectatorial pleasure as a battlefield within which viewers can renegotiate their own gendered subjectivity. I suggested, finally, that if this approach is incorporated into the feminist film theory discussed in the previous chapter, such theory could form the basis for a more dynamic film practice. I would now add that such a film practice could be employed within organised resistance to violence against women. One can begin to see the value of the framework proposed here for the analysis of representations of violence against women by looking at what Mulvey herself wrote about the "masochistic" way in which women are drawn to the "women's picture". "There is", she states, "? a dizzy satisfaction in witnessing the way that sexual difference under patriarchy is fraught, explosive and erupts dramatically into violence within its own private stomping ground, the family" (Kaplan, 1983:26). Here, pleasure and violence are not seen as opposites: an emphasis, it seems to me, which opens up the possibility of a more forceful mode of analysis.

In the following chapters, I will illustrate the value of this approach to feminist media analysis. The next chapter begins this discussion by assessing the role of one particular film in making an intervention into power relations which give rise to violence against women. I have chosen to focus on this film because it plays an important role in the CAP video workshop discussed in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6. Through my evaluation of this film, I am able to link my arguments about feminist film analysis to my discussion, in these later chapters, of the CAP course.

## THE ACCUSED:

## Analysing Images of Rape

- Katherine: You saw everything.  
 Ken: Those other guys didn't do anything. It was like a show, big deal, they watched. I bet if you asked a thousand people nine-hundred and ninety-nine would have watched. It's no crime!  
 Katherine: They did more than watch, and that is a crime. (*The Accused*)

At the close of *The Accused*, just before the credits, the screen darkens and we are told, in writing: "In the USA, a rape is reported every six minutes". And: "One out of every four rape victims is attacked by two or more assailants". The inclusion of these statements illustrate a preoccupation, in the film, with the public acknowledgement of the responsibility that certain dominant social institutions bear for the occurrence of rape. Statistics are one way of "making visible" their responsibility by drawing on the authority of "scientific evidence". These particular statistics operate as part of an attempt to "make visible" the social relations in which, the film argues, rape is based. The first statistic, which gives evidence of the constant occurrence of rape, can be linked to the film's implied argument that rape is a "normal" part of society rather than an act of transgression. The second statistic, which states that rape is often committed by groups of assailants,<sup>12</sup> can be linked to a second implied argument: that acts of rape often depend on a set of relations between a whole group of people. Both statistics can be read as illustrations of the idea that rape is not an act committed by lone "deviants" who violate the rules of a society. They support, more specifically, an assertion in the film that rape is an act embedded in power relations structured along lines of gendered identity. *The Accused* seems concerned with what one might call a "rape culture": a social sphere which constantly reproduces the power relations within which acts of rape are embedded.

This approach to the analysis of rape can be discerned within the film's narrative structure. The first court case (which hinges on the prosecution of the rapists) is settled out of court-the rapists are charged with "reckless endangerment": a crime which carries the same sentence as rape. This case is marked by the film as an unsatisfactory resolution. *The Accused* highlights, instead, the second court case, in which a group of men who watched the

rape are found guilty of instigating it. I would argue that this plot structure forms part of the film's proposal that response to such cases should go far beyond the prosecution and punishment of the rapists, to include a critique of society as a whole. Two interlinked statements about this issue can be discerned: firstly, by means of this story, the film argues that not only the rapist were guilty of a crime, but also the men who watched and cheered. This assertion begins to function as an even wider charge of guilt-guilt for the frequent occurrence of the rape of women in society. As I will attempt to show, the film suggests that the rape of women is an act embedded in power relations structured along lines of gendered identity. Secondly, the film points out, by means of this story, that not only the punishment of the rapists is at issue, but also the public acknowledgement of rape. Katherine Murphy, the District Attorney in charge of Sarah's case, opted for the out-of-court settlement because rape is notoriously difficult to prove in court. The sentence resulting from this settlement was not recognised as a punishment for rape (only for "reckless endangerment"). This means that Sarah's experience of having been raped not only goes unrecognised-its occurrence is officially denied. The film's treatment of this issue becomes part of a wider concern about the fact that the occurrence of rape is habitually denied in this way within the public sphere. In its rejection of this settlement and its exploration of the second court case, the film seems to argue that critical response to rape should include a struggle to "make visible" the nature of rape. This means making visible women's experience of being raped (i.e. "breaking the silence")-and, as explained above, the responsibility born by dominant institutions for the occurrence of rape.

These two assertions about the proper responses to acts of rape are, as noted above, interlinked: the argument that dominant social values give rise to rape is used to explain, for example, the fact that rape is so difficult to prove in court (an example of publicly acknowledging rape). Legislation, in other words, is informed by dominant social values which do not view rape unambiguously as a crime.

We saw, in Chapter 1, that feminism tends to be defined as a critique of society which focuses on the position of women within social relations. Feminist analysis of violence against women (discussed, in Chapter 2, within the context of both feminist sexuality debates and feminist film criticism) tends to focus on the issue of the public expression; both of women's sexual identity and of their experience of oppression. The two preoccupations described above could therefore be said to mark the response of rape proposed by *The*

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<sup>12</sup> We are expected to understand automatically that this is a group of men who attack one woman.

*Accused* as feminist.

However, a closer look at the film reveals that its analysis of violence against women is based within a conservative understanding of gendered identity. This conservatism leads to some questions about the nature of the feminist approach to rape adopted by the film. The response offered by the film to the problem of "breaking the silence" is, I think, a problematic one. It reveals a disturbing fact about whom, in the final analysis, the film holds responsible for the occurrence of gender-violence in contemporary society. It seems reasonable to say that one can only evaluate the film's approach to rape once this question is answered: who, in the final analysis, are "the accused"?

In this chapter, I will try to answer this question by applying the principles of both sociological and psychoanalytic feminist film theory to an analysis of this film. This process of analysis will be an investigation of the interaction between the language of classical realism within which *The Accused* is based and the language of resistance of feminist film theory.<sup>13</sup> In this way, I am able to examine the limitations and possibilities of employing such theory within a challenge to dominant discourses about violence against women.<sup>14</sup> I will focus, here, on the ability of such theory to challenge the film's incorporation of feminist principles into conservative social analysis. In this way, I am able to extend on my evaluation in the previous chapter of the value of these frameworks within feminist interventions into dominant representations of violence against women. As in the previous chapter, my examination will centre on Laura Mulvey's understanding of the ideological operation of spectatorial pleasure.

### **A "sociological" analysis of *The Accused***

A "sociological" analysis would, according to its definition in Chapter 1, focus on the content of the film - such as the events that make up the narrative of the film, the roles of the various characters, and the way in which the characters relate to each other. It does not, in other words, deal with film language as such-that is, the operation of elements underlying the surface meaning of the narrative, patterns of images, editing techniques, camera angles, and the spectator/screen relationship. An analysis of *The Accused* which focuses simply on its content does, nevertheless, offer some interesting perspectives on the role of this film within

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<sup>13</sup> To avoid repetition in style I will simply speak, in this chapter, of "feminist film theory" to refer to the particular body of psychoanalytic and semiotic theory discussed in Chapter One.

<sup>14</sup> In Chapter Two it was stated that the term "classical realist film" is used in this thesis as synonymous with "dominant" or "Hollywood" cinema. These terms refer, as explained, to contemporary mainstream cinema which consist of feature-length, narrative sound films, made and distributed by the Hollywood studio system.



feminist politics.

*The Accused* appears to conceive of gender relations in terms of a "war of the sexes", within which women and men are placed in opposing camps. Women are also isolated from one another - while men tend to be grouped together. It is certainly noticeable that women are mostly seen on their own in this film, or as lone women in the company of men - as if they are being kept apart according to a patriarchal stratagem of "divide and rule". When Katherine goes to interview the two other women in the film, Sally and Sarah, she invariably finds them alone. Furthermore, Katherine finds them doing archetypal female domestic work - Sarah ironing, and Sally hanging up the washing. At work they are also involved in such activities: serving food and sweeping floors. Here they are equally isolated: Sarah seems to be the only waitress in the diner where she works - and at The Mill (the bar where Sarah was raped) the waitresses work in shifts, so that Sally is also on her own. The separation of women happens here by means of their positioning within social relations-Sally and Sarah are banished to the solitude of the domestic sphere, even as working women. Katherine herself experiences separation as well-she appears to be the only female lawyer in her firm. Men, on the other hand, tend to move around in groups-as if there is safety in numbers. This is true of the crowd of men in The Mill, and also of Katherine's colleagues. Her boss, for example, is always accompanied by a supportive underling; and in both court cases, Katherine is faced by three lawyers for the defence while she represents Sarah on her own.

This positioning of women and men forms part of the film's discussion of the operation of rape culture. It explains rape culture in terms of a framework which views the construction of the male ego as precarious, and in need of constant reaffirmation. According to the film the instability of male identity seems to be based in the fact that men want to "have their cake and eat it", as it were. A declaration of heterosexuality is crucial to the stability of patriarchal masculine identity, but at the same time men refuse to accept any commitment to heterosexual relationships. Heterosexuality would be fine, in other words, if it didn't have to involve interaction with women. In the film, sexual relationships of any kind hardly feature at all. Even Katherine's own love life is given very little importance. One ends up with the impression that there is something extremely feeble about such relationships. This frailty is, we find, generated by the men themselves, who seem incapable of emotional commitment. We hear that Sarah's father walked out on her family when she was a child, and that her mother's latest lover had recently done the same. Sarah's own boyfriend follows in these men's footsteps, adding insult to injury by taking her belongings with him. The reason why

Sarah was at The Mill on the night of the rape was, in fact, because she wanted to talk to Sally about her boyfriend who was sleeping around with other women. In the film, male heterosexuality itself is clearly shown to have very shaky foundations (female heterosexuality is not really seen, I think, as relevant to the issue). However, in order to retain their sense of identity, men need to reaffirm their position within heterosexual (which seems equivalent to patriarchal) relations of power. This reaffirmation happens, according to the film, through various interlinked mechanisms-which together operate as rape culture. To compensate for the instability of the male ego, these mechanisms are powerful and efficient.

The rape-scene contains a sequence which is of especial importance to the film's illustration of these mechanisms. This sequence can be divided into two parts. The first occurs when the man called Kurt, who obviously has been labelled by the others as homosexual, is goaded into raping Sarah. We hear the men shouting "needle-duck" and "faggot", and "are you afraid we'll see your silk panties when you pull your trousers down?" He takes this as a challenge, and it is at this moment that the film's soundtrack fades up over the fast beat of the jukebox with slow, menacing, but almost lyrical violin music. The film thus marks this as a moment of revelation for the spectator, as if to say "Ah, so this is what it is all about. They're all repressing their latent homosexuality". The film "explains" the rape-scene, then, as an act based in the denial of male homosexuality.

The second part of this sequence begins when the camera switches from Kurt to the barmaid Sally, who finally notices what is happening to her friend in the game-room. When she stands in the doorway looking in, the man who is organising the rape (whom I will call the Scorpion) turns and points at her, saying, "Come on, you next, huh"? Sally backs off hurriedly, and leaves the bar as quickly as possible. She is forced, through fear for her own safety, to betray her friend by running away. This second incident functions, I think, to make two points. First of all, it illustrates the way in which women are kept apart from each other in rape culture because they are, for very good reasons, afraid of the consequences of grouping together. They are kept apart by the threat of violence. We have already seen that the reason why Sarah was at The Mill in the first place was because her boyfriend was cheating on her and she had gone to see Sally for moral support. In the context of the film's treatment of female solidarity, this functions as a further reason why Sarah needs to be punished. Secondly, the incident shows how, in a rather contradictory fashion, women are banished completely from the "inner sanctum" of heterosexual rape culture even though they are the central object of this culture. Sally is, in a way, echoing the actions of the college

boy's girlfriend, who left the bar at the beginning of this scene. One could say that Sally, Bob's girlfriend and even Sarah herself are excluded from the rape-that this is, in fact, the purpose of the rape. We saw earlier that women are present amongst groups of men-even if only in the singular. Their response is, in fact, necessary to the reaffirmation of male heterosexual identity. At the same time, however, their presence as subjects must be violently denied in order for the patriarchal relations of power within heterosexuality to endure. The rape is explained, then, as an act which excludes Sarah altogether and functions as a way in which the men prove something to each other. It is, indeed, almost as if Sarah is not present at all during this scene; the men do not "see" her, and their actions seem to be directed at each other. Sarah's presence is needed within rape culture inasmuch as she is necessary to a reaffirmation of the men's virility and heterosexuality, but she is at the same time completely absent from this male world except as an image of "woman" as object. The slow, menacing music which began in the first part of the sequence is continued in the second, binding the two together. The sequence is marked, by this distinct change in the soundtrack as a moment of epiphany-maybe the central moment of revelation within the whole film.

Besides this particular sequence, the sequence which includes the rape-scene can, as a whole, also be seen to suggest that Sarah, as an object, is necessary to rape culture while at the same time, as a subject, she is a threat. It does so by illustrating that the display of female sexuality is both necessary to the mechanisms of rape culture, and at the same time must be punished and controlled because it poses a threat to those mechanisms. Just before the rape takes place, a song starts playing on the jukebox. Sarah recognises it as one that she likes, and begins to dance. This dance does not merely function as a display of her desirability, although she obviously takes pleasure in the men's reactions to her body, it is also an expression of her own desire. Her body, in the dance, seems filled with power - not only because of her muscular, controlled movements but also, one could say, because she seems to take possession of her own sexuality. Sarah's dance becomes a perfect example of the threat of female sexuality to the operation of rape culture.<sup>15</sup> Sarah is punished for her dance by being gang-raped. Notice that during the rape, her mouth is being held shut. This cannot

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<sup>15</sup> Dancing, in western culture, has often functioned as a symbol of "wayward" expression of female desire. The archetypal example of this can be found in the fairy-tale about the young girl who has been given a new pair of red dancing shoes. She is told, however, that since it is Sunday, she is not allowed to dance and should instead go to church. She disobeys, but finds that the shoes will not stop dancing so that she is forced to carry on until she finally dances herself to death.

simply be explained as an attempt to stop her from calling for help: within the game-room the rape does not represent an act that needs to be stopped. On a symbolic level the stifling of Sarah's cries functions, rather, as a further example of rape culture's policing of women -the silencing of women's voices.

My analysis, above, indicates that the events within the story and the establishment of "roles" in *The Accused* operates as a feminist critique of rape. It seems, however, that this critique is ultimately contained within a conservative framework. This becomes clear, for example, when one realises that although the film places rape within the sphere of the social, its analysis of violence is based within an essentialist understanding of gendered identity.

Identification with feminism, in *The Accused*, manifests, in fact, as a concentrated effort to adopt a critical attitude towards men. This criticism takes the form, for example, of an unflattering depiction of all the male characters in the film. Even Kenny Joyce, the witness who testifies for the prosecution, hardly constitutes a "positive" male figure. The detective investigating the rape is the one exception, but he appears for only a few minutes. For the rest, men are variously characterised as pompous, domineering, insecure, depraved, brutal, self-indulgent, immature, witless, irresponsible, corrupt, ineffectual and weak. The suggestion seems to be, furthermore, that it is such typical "male" characteristics which lie behind the occurrence of rape in society. The men in *The Accused* all seem to be either rapists, avid spectators of rape, or in some way implicated in camouflaging the truth about rape. The women, on the other hand, are treated with sympathy.

The film thus makes use of an understanding of gendered identity based in a rigid divide between fixed categories of male and female. Inherent to its approach is the idea, mentioned earlier, of a kind of "war of the sexes", in which men and women are ultimately placed in antagonistic camps. What divides them, it seems, is the violence of the men - especially their violence towards women. Even Sally's children are already involved in this battle: we hear her laughingly tell Sarah how her little boy kicked his sister in the head. Within this war men stand together to reaffirm their power (even Sarah's dreadful boyfriend testifies against her, telling the court "what kind of a woman she is"). Women, on the other hand, are silenced and kept apart from each other.

It is clear, then that *The Accused*, in its approach to the politics of gender-violence, makes use of an understanding of gendered identity based in a rigid divide between fixed categories of male/masculine on the one hand and female/feminine on the other. To illustrate this point, I will again look at the film on the level of content. The film does offer the

possibility of feminist resistance. In the society which it is discussing, there exists a sisterhood, within which women are drawn together through their response to male violence.

At the beginning of the film we are shown two members of this movement: the doctor and the rape crisis councillor. When Katherine walks into this scene, she is obviously excluded from this group. "I'm not a rape crisis counsellor, she tells the women, "I'm a prosecutor and I have to make a rape case". "Then go prosecute", returns the doctor, and exchanges an exasperated look with the counsellor behind Katherine's back. It seems that the legal world within which Katherine is involved is to a large extent equated with patriarchy. As we will see, to "be a prosecutor" makes it impossible to be a full member of the sisterhood. On the other hand, to "be a rape crisis counsellor" is to be a sister in the most intense sense of the word. Feminism is defined, here, by male violence against women. In the story that follows, Katherine will become converted to the sisterhood through her experience of the reality of rape culture. Having joined, she then sets out earnestly to convert others. However, the film pointedly excludes the possibility of men joining this feminist struggle. This is made clear in the scene in which Katherine's boss tells her that he won't allow her to prosecute the men who watched the rape. "If you lose", he says, "you'll look like an incompetent. If you win, you'll look like a vengeful bitch. Either way you hurt this office". "We owe her", retorts Katherine, then hesitates and amends, "I owe her". This is, partly, an admission of guilt; Katherine feels that she has betrayed Sarah by making deals with the enemy. It is also, however, a realisation that she stands on her own, that her male colleagues will not be part of a feminist struggle. She can, however, convert women. "She's your friend", she tells Sally, amongst the flapping washing, trying to convince her to help Sarah. Sally rallies to the cause, and agrees to identify the men who watched the rape.

However, women's voices cannot be heard within the machine of rape culture. We see this, for example, in Sarah's frustrated wish to "tell her story". Almost the first thing that Sarah says in the film is "I heard somebody scream and it was me". Throughout the rest of the film, this preoccupation with her ability to express herself is continued, as she struggles without success to make herself heard. When she does manage to do so, she clearly does not know how to talk within the male world she finds herself in. We see this in the scene outside the courtroom during the second case. Sarah and Katherine are being mobbed by reporters. Katherine deals with them quite coolly, but Sarah finally explodes. "Sonofabith"! she yells into the expectant microphones: "Are you deaf, assholes, no comment"! We see that when Sarah's voice is heard, it is hardly demure, and liable to upset her chances of gaining

sympathy from the powers that be. There is a tension in the film, then, between the wish for Sarah to be able to "tell her story" and, at the same time a troubled feeling that if she does open her mouth, she might upset the apple-cart. As a further illustration of the place of women's voices in this world, we see that Sally's testimony is not only ineffective, but is in fact used by the defence to describe Sarah's 'incriminating' statements before the rape.

Katherine seems to be the only woman who can make her voice heard in the right way, because she knows and understands the business of negotiating with the male world of law. She fails, however, because her power to make her voice heard is based on "making deals"-in compromising her position as a woman. She has, in a way, to become a bit "masculine" to survive as a lawyer. One could say that it is Katherine who is on trial here. Can she make a success at surviving in the man's world of the courtroom and still remain true to herself as a woman? In other words, can she avoid selling out, and going over to the other side of the war between the sexes? It slowly becomes obvious that she can't. This is clear from the scene in the hospital room, when Sarah, bathed in a kind of holy light, says to Katherine in devastating accusation:

Everybody thinks I'm a piece of shit. Why not? You told 'em that - I never got to tell nobody nothing. You did all my talking for me. I don't get it ... I thought you were on my side. You told me you were on my side ... Why'd you do that?

This scene occurs straight after Katherine recognises the Scorpion in the hospital corridor. This, in fact, is the "truth" that she walks into - a truth about her own compromised position as a woman in a man's world. Here it is Katherine who is "the accused".

Later, Katherine confesses to Sarah: "Before I agreed to do the deal I should have offered you the chance to go on trial and testify". However, when Sarah does testify, it is an anti-climax; her testimony is "nothing" as the defence comments. Katherine's own position as her representative is also, in the end, not crucial to the outcome of the court case. It is Ken's voice which makes the difference. He gets called back three times by the jury, while Sarah, to her further annoyance, is ignored. In the end it is unclear whether Katherine has managed to absolve her guilt by putting the spectators on trial. Because of Ken's agreement to stand as witness, she manages to side-step the question posed earlier-whether a woman can make her voice heard within patriarchal relations of power without hopelessly compromising herself.

It seems to me that, in the above analysis of *The Accused*, valuable statements are made about the film's approach to the issue of rape. However, such analysis ultimately reads

the film as a "reflection" of reality-viewing it simply as a description of social relations which are exploitative to women. Because of this, I contend that this approach cannot address the fact that the film is implicated in a reaffirmation of those social relations. In the following section I will apply the principles of psychoanalytic film theory to my analysis of the film. In this way, I will establish whether this mode of analysis presents a more valuable intervention into the conservative ideological operation of *The Accused*.

### **A "Psychoanalytic" analysis of *The Accused***

As indicated above, *The Accused* aims to operate as a commentary on the high incidence of the rape of women in contemporary society-a commentary which the film presents as "feminist". *The Accused* breaks with the conservative understanding of rape as something which is beyond the social, beyond the possibility of change. Within such a conservative understanding, rape would have been an individual violation of the dominant values of contemporary society. The alternative approach suggests, rather, that rape originates from, and is perpetuated by, dominant institutions and practices. Most mainstream films make use of conventional approaches to gender violence which tend to marginalise the issue of rape. This alternative approach, in contrast, emphasises that a discussion of rape is central to the critique of social relations. In this way, then, the film seems seriously to challenge the operation of classical realist cinema in the reproduction of a society in which a rape " ... is reported every six minutes". I would argue that, if one situates oneself within the psychoanalytic framework discussed in the previous chapter, one would have to respond to this claim of feminism with disquiet.

As explained earlier, a central focus of psychoanalytic film theory is a critique of classical realist film. Analysis informed by such theory functions, typically, as a resistance to the illusionism on which this cinematic tradition depends. Through an exploration of narrative structure, editing, camera angles and the entire construction of "reality" within the viewing process effected by filmic language, the construction of meaning is "made visible"; it refuses to accept the subject positions offered to viewers by such a film as "obvious". Within feminist appropriations of this framework, illusionism of this kind is understood to be a gendered construction of meaning which is caught up in relations of power. Viewers identify with particular positions within gendered relations of domination and submission - and these spectatorial positions are repressive to women. Within analysis informed by these

ideas, resistance to illusionism becomes a refusal to accept the gendered subject positions offered to viewers as "obvious" or "natural". In the context of a psychoanalytic critique it would therefore be seen as alarming that, despite its feminist stance, *The Accused* still offers the visual image of rape as its central moment of revelation: the final disclosure of what the rape had been "about". In theoretical analyses of *The Accused* it is this argument that is most often put forward: that the full cinematic depiction of the rape contradicts the film's feminist perspective (Fleck, 1989:182 and Riggs, 1989:214-233).

Notice, for example, that the visual representation of the gang-rape is not just shown from Ken's point of view: we are offered the scene in all its cinematic plenitude-as if, now, we are finally given unmediated access to the rape-scene. Note also, in the opening sequence of the film, that we as spectators are excluded from the enclosure of The Mill and encouraged to be curious about what happened there. It is partly this sense of curiosity which provides *The Accused* with its narrative movement-which, from this opening shot, progresses inexorably towards the final, visual representation of the gang-rape at the close of the film. *The Accused* offers visual images of rape as more convincing evidence than verbal testimony. All of this could mean that the film, despite its feminist stance, forms part of classical realist cinema in its claim to be providing unmediated access to the "truth" about rape. As such, the film could be said to negate its own position within the construction of the meaning of gender violence. The film indeed sets up a narrative structure and spectatorial relations which create the illusionism, the uniquely powerful impression of reality, provided by such cinema.

One might argue that while the film might be "feminist" in terms of its content, through making use of illusionism, it easily contains this feminism within a conservative framework. It seems to me, however, that in the case of *The Accused*, a psychoanalytic approach is not necessarily forceful enough to challenge this process through which feminist frameworks are appropriated and contained within the conservative language of mainstream cinema. I would argue that this film has, in fact, taken up the principles of psychoanalytic theory and successfully integrated them into this conservative language. In the section below, I will again look at the narrative structure and patterns of images which compose this film to illustrate this point.

I have described the way in which the film "explains" the gang-rape in terms of "rape culture". It is, however, possible to go even further and to see in the film an analysis of the role of spectatorship within rape culture.

There is a strong focus, within *The Accused*, on male spectator sports (such as boxing,



ice-hockey, basketball and baseball) and mechanised or electronic games (such as pinball machines and video games). The film discusses male spectator sports as a public "show" of violence constructed for the entertainment of an audience-what I will call "mediated" violence. The text seems to imply that mediated violence plays a crucial role in the construction of male identity-and the reaffirmation of patriarchal relations of power. As pointed out earlier, the film looks at the way in which rape culture reproduces social relations along patriarchal lines of gendered identity. I would add now that, according to the film, mediated violence operates in this way by "masculinizing" its audience, while the sports are themselves "feminised". The audience of mediated violence is male-and the emphasis is on the presence of whole groups of men. Women, on the other hand, are present only in the singular - and, in fact, only as images of "woman". As such, they are merely present within the show of violent sports as objects. They are, in fact, positioned as the "object" of the game. "Male" sport becomes represented in terms of the fetishist female body: this feminisation can be traced throughout the film. For example, Sarah, when she works at the diner, has to wear a costume reminiscent of a baseball uniform - this reference is clearly supposed to be an erotic one. A further example can be found in the television set in *The Mill*, which alternately shows images of violent sport (boxing) and of women (a fragmented woman's face is shown as Sarah flees from the bar). The pinball-machine on which Sarah is assaulted is the central example of spectator sport as mediated violence, and of the feminisation of the "object" of the game. It is decorated with a picture of a blonde bimbo in a cheerleader uniform being "slamdunked" through a basketball net.<sup>16</sup> This picture is echoed in the rape-scene itself, in which Sarah is very much the "object of the game". Like the girl depicted on the pinball machine, her position is that of a ball in a game of basketball, to be "slam-dunked" through the net so that the players can "score". I have said that the film looks both at spectator sports and mechanised and electronic games. These two spheres are both referred to in the image of the pinball machine. By merging, in this way, its discussion of male spectator sport with that of mechanised/electronic games, it might be implying that spectator sport, as a form of mediated violence, functions like a machine. The suggestion might be, further, that such sport forms part of the efficient mechanisms of rape culture. This examination of the way in which rape culture reproduces itself in the sphere of leisure can be

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<sup>16</sup> The words "slam-dunk" appear in large letters on the pinball machine. I have noticed that, in films and television programmes which deal with court cases, the word "slam-dunk" is often used as a referring to an "open and shut" case - one in which the guilt of the accused is obvious and easy to prove.

seen to focus on the role of visual media. One indication of this is the fact that Katherine's search for the responsible parties in the rape takes place primarily in terms of concepts of show and spectatorship. As we have seen, there is never any question about the guilt of the rapists themselves-*The Accused* focuses, rather, on those who watched the rape. Sarah's rape is, in fact, repeatedly called a "show". In the rape-sequence itself, Bob's girlfriend emphasises this, as she walks out:

Barman: Are you off, honey?

Girl: Yeah, I don't like the show.

At this stage, Sarah has not yet been raped, and her dance could easily be described as a show. However, when the lawyer defending Bob the college boy uses this word at the beginning of the film, he is clearly referring to more than the dance. He is one of the first characters to express this idea, commenting: "She put on a show, pure and simple". According to the lawyer's logic, we must conclude that if Sarah, "put on a show", what happened later could not be defined as rape. As pointed out earlier, the film is not concerned with whether the rape had taken place-this is taken for granted. *The Accused* does, however, take the lawyer's reasoning seriously-it merely follows the argument through to its logical conclusion. Accepting that the object of evaluation is a show of violence, the film goes on to ask whether such a show is not just as much implicated in "real" violence and therefore in questions of blame and guilt. When Katherine asks the Scorpion what happened at the bar, he echoes the lawyer's attitude:

Scorpion: She's a whore. Last time I saw her she was doing a sex show.

Katherine: You watched?

Scorpion: Yeah sure I watched, she put on a great show.

Katherine: I thought she was raped.

Scorpion: Raped? She fucks a bar full of guys and then turns around and tries to blame them for it. Listen, lady, she loved it. She had an audience. She had the show of her life. Next time she does a show tell her I'll be right there to cheer her on!

This time, we see that a show is further defined by "having an audience"-and an audience, it seems, is blameless by definition. Similarly, in a discussion with Ken Joyce:

Katherine: You saw everything.

Ken: Those other guys didn't do anything. It was like a show, big deal, they watched. I bet if you asked a thousand people nine-hundred and ninety-nine would have watched. It's no crime!

The film challenges this supposed innocence of the spectator. Katherine sets out to prove that the crowd at The Mill were not "merely" an audience. She replies to Ken: "That did more

than watch, and that is a crime". Katherine is, in the words of her boss, "prosecuting a bunch of spectators". To prove their culpability, she sets out to demonstrate that they were actively involved in the rape as spectators. In the court room, she explains:

It is not a crime of criminal solicitation to walk away from a rape ... it is not a crime to silently watch a rape ... it is a crime to induce, entreat and encourage another person to commit a rape ... these three men did worse than nothing ... they made sure.

To silently watch: this could be a description of the activity of a cinema spectator. The film's evaluation of this activity is, however, ambiguous-and this ambiguity is, I believe, of central importance to the position of *The Accused* within feminist debates about media. On the one hand, the film could be arguing that one has to "do more than watch"-i.e. be more than "simply" a passive spectator - to be implicated in the construction of meaning in a film. On the other hand, the film could be suggesting that the activity of the cinema spectator is not passive, that spectators, "do more than watch". They participate in the construction of meaning which takes place in the viewing process, and are responsible parties within that process. These two arguments are, clearly informed by very different political positions within feminist debates about the role of spectators within media politics. I would suggest that both these meanings are present within the film - but that one would have to evaluate, within the context of the film as a whole, which of these arguments carries more weight.

It has been suggested, above, that the pinball machine is a principal metaphor for mediated violence in the film. I would add that the analogy of the pinball machine allows the film to relate its discussions of the mediated violence of rape culture to another machine; that of the cinematic apparatus (and to some extent that of television). The glass top of the pinball machine, which divides players from its lighted interior with its colour, noise, and violent movement is reminiscent of the screen which divides spectators from the interior world of cinema and television. I would say that, in its representation of this machine, the film is addressing the nature of this divide between spectator and image. It is, furthermore, dealing with the relation between images and the "reality" they are supposed to refer to. Images of violence on a cinema screen are not simply a reflection of "real" violence.

Towards the end of the film, there is a sequence in which Katherine visits The Mill and watches a man playing a game of pinball at this machine. He crouches over the machine, thrusting his body forward every time he hits the ball: a posture that mimics precisely (as we see later, in the rape-scene) that which the rapists had adopted over Sarah's body. One almost visualises Sarah on the pinball machine between his arms. Within the context of the film's

preoccupations, one could read this sequence as a suggestion that the metaphor of the pinball-game itself has at some level become inseparable from the film's representation of the act of rape. We see a further support for this idea in the Scorpion's taunt, when he recognises Sarah in the record-shop. "Wanna play pinball"? he jeers. Here again the game of pinball is synonymous with the act of rape. When we finally see how Sarah is assaulted on top of this machine, it is almost as if the gang-rape is an emanation of everything the pinball-machine stands for-as if the division between this "suggested" violence and the "real" violence of the rape had dissolved. In this way, the film makes two points. Firstly, it suggests that the representation of violence in cinema is implicated in the occurrence of "real" violence, because it helps to reproduce the social relations within which such violence is embedded. Secondly, it implies that spectators of such "shows" of violence are actively involved in the construction of meaning that takes place in the viewing process and are, as such, also implicated in the operation of such cinema.

We can see that *The Accused* is basing its critique of "rape culture" on some of the key principles of psychoanalytic theory. The incorporation of these principles means that the film's analysis of rape culture becomes self-reflexive, in the sense that it is exploring the institutions and practices within which this film itself exists. *The Accused* examines the important role played by classical realist cinema in the reproduction of the patriarchal and heterosexual power relations within which gender violence is based. One indication of this reflexivity can be found in the film's inversion of the traditional narrative structure of classical realist cinema. We have seen, earlier, that *The Accused* comments on the masculinization of the spectator and the feminisation of the object of the game". One could perhaps say that, by making this its focus of attention, the film is examining the characteristics of classical realist film itself. According to certain of the feminist theorisation discussed in Chapter 1, the narrative movement (or "narrativity") of classical realist film is generated by a very similar process to that outlined in *The Accused* in its discussion of mediated violence. Narrativity, according to such studies, is generated by the "difficulty" of the feminine. Masculinity, on the other hand, is seen as the unproblematic "norm" of gendered subjectivity, and is not problematised within such film. It is from this normal "male" viewpoint that the "feminine" screen is watched. *The Accused* suggests that this representation of the feminine functions, in the end, as a repression of the difficulty of the masculine as a mirror which confirms the patriarchal masculine spectator position. It does so by inverting the traditional narrative structure and thus offering it as an object or study instead

of a point of view. As we saw above, a discussion of the precarious male psyche is central to this film's analysis of gender violence. It is, then, masculinity which is problematised here, and a woman (Katherine Murphy) who is placed as objective observer of this phenomenon. Narrativity, within this inversion, is generated by an exposure at the beginning of the film of the "difficulty" of the masculine.

The film opens with a shot of the exterior of The Mill, within which, we soon realise, a rape is taking place. We learn later that, until the gang-rape, Sarah had been very much a participant in that rape culture, playing the role of the sexy blonde with a good deal of relish. However, when she crashes out through the doors of the bar, it is as if she has been released by the mechanisms of rape culture represented by The Mill: released, because she witnessed the "primal scene" which lies at the centre of that culture. The contradictions within women's position in rape culture had become too large and obvious for her to remain content within its wheels. It has the classical cinematic structure of a detective story, with Katherine (the objective female observer) setting out to expose the "truth" that lies behind the rape—a truth that has to do with the nature of the male psyche. As the film progresses, it seems as if more and more is being revealed to her about the mystery of the masculine. The suggestion seems to be that Katherine is being led (or is making her way) into a dark collective male subconscious, until the origins of male rape culture is "revealed" to her. One might say that this inversion of the traditional narrative structure of mainstream film shows the film's reflexivity; at some level it offers itself as an example of a mainstream film, a machine which needs to be explored in a critical fashion. The film creates this suggestion of reflexivity, furthermore, by emphasising its own existence as a material artefact. The circular nature of the narrative, for example, creates the feeling that *The Accused* is not based in linear time. It is almost as if the film is an object in itself, in which the rape is always happening (this makes the statistics given at the end of the film even more fitting). Progression is not so much through time as through the space of the film. It is as if the film itself represents a subterranean maze through which Katherine must make her way to find out the "truth" about mediated violence. Katherine's expedition into the male psyche is, as it were, a real journey into an actual maze made up of cinematic images, with the minotaur's lair of the game-room at its core. Shots of corridors are emphasised more than once, and in them, lights are switched on and doors opened, so that Katherine is permitted to peer inside. In one scene, for example, we see her entering, at night, the building where she works. As she walks resolutely towards her office, intent on finding answers, she switches on lights in the dark

corridors and offices. Such sequences reinforce the idea that the film itself is a dark maze which Katherine is exploring.

This maze is, in fact, more like a machine (or a cinematic apparatus): it is as if *The Accused* consists of a giant pinball-game. Like the game, the film is itself full of long corridors, mirrors, lights, and enclosures divided from each other by glass. The word "slam-dunk" on the pinball-machine is echoed at various points in the soundtrack of the film: a primeval, metallic, heart-beat noise. One could even say that, when Sarah rams her car head-long into the Scorpion's truck, she becomes the embodiment of the "slam-dunking" metal pinball. One notices also that the sign of a scorpion appears on one of the pinball machines in the game room. Like the word "slam-dunk", this sign finds its equivalent element in the structure of the film itself (that is, in the Scorpion-man), supporting the idea that the film operates as an embodiment of the pinball machine. In the rape scene, the Scorpion appears, in fact, as if he stepped right out of the pinball-machine marked with this sign - stepping out of this machine into the film as it were. Sarah Tobias could, within such an analysis, be seen as the embodiment of the blonde bimchette on the pinball machine on which she is assaulted. She, too, has stepped out of the pinball machine into the film.

If one accepts that the pinball machine is used to illustrate the ideological operation of visual media, it makes sense to say that *The Accused*, as an embodiment of a pinball machine, is centrally concerned with the operation of television and cinema as forms of mediated violence. One notices, for example, that many of the enclosures within this "machine" are partitioned off with glass. Katherine's office is one such enclosure, as shown in the scene in which Sally is being interviewed, while Sarah waits outside, looking in through the glass partition. Another example of this can be found in the room in which the identity - parade takes place: it is partitioned off from the compartment where Sally is watching by means of a glass screen. I would suggest that these glass partitions are, again, reminiscent of the screens that divided audiences from the world of cinema and television. One of the network of "corridors" that links the various enclosures within this cinematic pinball machine is, in fact, that of broadcast television. The film repeatedly makes a link between the bar, the college cafeteria and the diner by means of television screens. A television set is shown, for example, in the diner. The camera zooms in until the television screen fills the cinema screen. It then pans back and we find ourselves in the college cafeteria. I would suggest, further, that this machine of mediated violence is defined, at some level, as a "dream-machine". As we have seen, Katherine is making her way into a dark collective

subconscious, until the origins of rape culture is "revealed" to her. She is even given mystical signs to follow in this labyrinth, which unlock the hidden meanings of this world - like archetypal dream-images. This is especially clear in a scene which occurs straight after Sarah rams her car into the Scorpion's truck. Katherine is sitting in the hospital corridor outside Sarah's room. She looks closely at the Scorpion as he walks past her. He turns round, hand on hip, and beckons to the woman following him, shouting "Come on, babe"! It is at this moment that Katherine sees the scorpion-tattoo on his arm - which marks him as the central instigator of the rape. At the instant in which she sees the tattoo, Sarah's door opens, so that a shaft of bright light falls over Katherine's face, indicating a moment of revelation for her. She turns her head to face the light, looks into the entrance of the door that has been opened for her, and gets up as if to walk into a clearer understanding of the mystery she is solving. It is as if the scorpion is a mystical sign that allows Katherine into the dream-world of the labyrinth.

When the Scorpion turns in the hospital corridor and beckons, he is, as it were, inviting Katherine to follow him into the pinball machine. It is as if he is the minotaur that lives at the heart of the labyrinth. She follows, and is slam-dunked from place to place, trying to find the central enclosure in which all will be revealed about the rape. The sequence in the hospital corridor occurs at the "half-way point" of the narrative. The film has by now dealt with and dismissed the question posed by the first court case; that is, whether the rape had taken place, and whether the rapists should be punished. Katherine has now reached the point at which she realises that there are deeper questions which must be answered - questions to do with the differentiation between mediated violence and "real" violence. What Katherine is being invited into, at this point, is the machine of mediated violence itself, in which new kinds of questions are posed: questions, as we saw earlier, about the culpability of the spectator in the show of violence - and, then, in the occurrence of "real" violence.

When the Scorpion turns and invites Katherine into the cinema-machine, his gesture could also be directed at the spectators of the film. He is, one might say, inviting them to enter the cinematic world of oedipal identification - and, as such, emphasising the presence of this invitation in the text. Similarly in the sequence mentioned earlier, in which the barmaid Sally becomes aware of what is happening to her friend Sarah in the game-room, the Scorpion turns around, looks straight at her and points, saying: "Come on! You next, huh"? The Scorpion's words clearly represent a threat to Sally. It is as if he is saying to her, "your turn next to be raped on the pin-ball machine". However, one cannot be completely sure

whether the Scorpion is in fact pointing at Sally at all. He turns around, looks towards the camera, and points at what he is looking at. He could, in fact, be pointing at one of the men in the game-room, in which case he is saying, "your turn to fuck her next". His words thus become a magician's trick, a mirror-game in which they could function as either invitation or threat.<sup>17</sup> One could, however, almost interpret the Scorpion's words as directed at the spectators of the film—who are left to decide whether they are being invited to rape or threatened with rape.<sup>18</sup> One could say that the film is confronting spectators with the fact that silently watching a cinema screen means, in fact, participating actively in the film. The Scorpion's words slip, within this interpretation, not just between invitation and threat, but also towards accusation. By confronting spectators with their act of watching the film is, in a way, disrupting this spectatorial relation, pointing out its culpability. Within the logic of the film's analysis of gender-violence, spectators are being made aware of their spectatorial positions: the "masculine" position of voyeurism/fetishism (your turn to rape her next), and the "feminine" position of masochism or narcissistic identification with the image (your turn to be raped next).

I have attempted, within the above, to offer a psychoanalytic reading of *The Accused*. I came to the conclusion, however, that the film itself deliberately operates in terms of the principles of psychoanalytic theory. *The Accused* has taken up principles of such theory and successfully integrated them into the language of classical realist cinema. I have said, at the beginning of this section, that this integration functions as a containment of a language of resistance within a conservative framework, rendering that language reasonably harmless. In the next section, I take this argument further by adding that the film is able to achieve this illusionism because of (rather than in spite of) the feminist framework of critique which it has incorporated.

### ***The Accused* and a critique of the concept of spectatorial pleasure**

In Chapter 2, I pointed out that psychoanalytic film theory tends to make use of an essentialist understanding of gendered identity. In doing so, an equation is drawn between the subject

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<sup>17</sup> The invitation to rape Sarah could in itself be interpreted as a threat - in this case to male sexual pride. The gang-rape had, after all, started partly because the man Kurt had been taunted about his supposed homosexuality. Here, too, one can see an ambiguity in the words of the Scorpion, pointing to the instability of male sexual identity.

<sup>18</sup> Here, again, the invitation could in itself be interpreted as a threat. For male spectators to be invited to take up



constructed by a film and the historically positioned viewer-thus leaving no place for women as agents in dominant cinema. As viewers, they are not subjects in their own right but the objects through which the patriarchal subject can be defined. This framework eliminates the possibility of a feminist spectatorial position: an approach which greatly limits the potential of feminist analysis. Although such analysis is often successful in making visible the construction of meaning in classical realist film, it does not necessarily offer one a powerful feminist position of resistance. It is, I think, because of this biological determinism that *The Accused* is able to incorporate the principles of psychoanalytic theory into the conservative framework of classical realist cinema.

*The Accused* suggests that visual representation of violence is only available through the voices of men. Ken, as a man, needs to bear witness before we gain visual access to the rape - and the Scorpion, as a man, makes the necessary "come-on" (we saw him turn around and say "come on, babe" in the hospital corridor, and later he repeats this statement in the games room: "come on, you next, huh"?) which allows us, as spectators, access to the cinematic text. This can be seen to be part of the film's feminist critique of the operation of visual media in rape culture. Feminist psychoanalytic theorists claim that the illusionism of the classical realist film is based in patriarchal relations of power, constructed along gender lines. Illusionism itself is constructed along the lines of gendered identification in which groups of men stand over and against images of individual women, and women are completely excluded (Mulvey, 1985:305-307; Kuhn, 1982:156-157). Within such a framework, the truth-value of visual representation is defined by its position within patriarchal power relations. *The Accused* suggests, in fact, that women cannot give evidence in this "male" world of visual representation because truth-value is defined in this way. There is, then, no contradiction in the film's assertion of the culpability of visual media in rape culture and its evaluation of the truth-value of visual representation.

Within the viewing process, the film negotiates with spectators the way in which they place themselves as gendered subjects. When one looks at this negotiation within the context of the film's essentialist approach to gendered identity, it becomes clear that spectators are asked by *The Accused* to watch as men, and as women. When the Scorpion turns round and points at the audience, he is saying "you to rape her next" to a male spectator and "you to be raped next" to a female spectator. Such a negotiation of spectatorial relations works to fortify rather than challenge the social relations of "rape culture". *The Accused*, while expressing a

challenge to classical realist cinema, thus, at the same time, contains that challenge so that it can still fit comfortably into the institution and practices of such cinema. It does so by calling on essentialist elements within feminism with which spectators identify.

In Chapter 1, I argues that in order to transcend the essentialist understanding of gender and sexuality within feminist film theory one has re-evaluate Mulvey's theorisation of spectatorial pleasure. Mulvey views the illusionism of classical realist cinema as dependent on the pleasures of spectatorship. For men, according to Mulvey, spectatorial pleasure is the pleasure of domination (of women); for women, it is either the pleasure of domination associated with taking up the position of the male viewer, or the masochistic pleasure of submission-and both, in some sense, are false pleasures. According to Mulvey's framework, resistance to dominant representations of women must therefore include a refusal of spectatorial pleasure. Feminist cinema therefore has to be what she calls a "counter cinema". She then also suggests that, since cinematic pleasure is necessarily caught up in patriarchal power relations, one cannot construct an authentically feminine spectatorial pleasure outside the structures of dominant cinema. Feminist counter cinema has to be based, then, in a refusal of spectatorial pleasure. Since one cannot construct feminine pleasure outside those power relations, feminists can only deny cinematic pleasure altogether. This denial, Mulvey argued, was a necessary prerequisite for freedom (Mulvey, 1985:305-307). This refusal of cinematic pleasure can be discerned within the framework of *The Accused*.

The film's evaluation of its own position as cinematic text within rape culture revolves around a concern with the visual representation of the gang-rape. *The Accused* can be seen to be 'about' the validity of including this sequence. Does it turn the film from a text about violence into a violent text? These two kinds of texts are differentiated from each other, according to the film, by means of their status as entertainment or evidence. The suggestion seems to be that, if a given text falls into the former category, it functions to reproduce the social relations within which rape is based; if in the latter, it challenges those relations. Violence as entertainment would probably, within such an analysis, be referred to as "pornographic". According to the logic of the film, visual access to the rape is allowed to us because Ken decides to testify; as such, the rape scene functions as testimony or evidence rather than entertainment.

The illusionism of classical realist cinema operates in terms of spectatorial pleasure-a pleasure which is, furthermore, constructed within patriarchal relations of power. The film examines the way in which spectatorial pleasure is constructed and then concludes that the

politically correct response would have to be a denial of pleasure-particularly sexual pleasure, whether homosexual or heterosexual. The gang-rape itself, as we saw earlier, is shown to be sparked off by the latent fear of male homosexuality of the rapists, and in a reaffirmation of precarious male heterosexual identity. It seems, then, that it is sexuality itself, of any kind, which lies at the root of sexual violence. The film seems to imply that, in light of this, the correct feminist response to sexual violence is to deny sexual pleasure altogether. This denial is representative, I think, of a general refusal to be involved in power relations. This follows logically from the film's suggestion that reproduction of rape culture is based in an essentialist gendered identity. The correct feminist response would be to reject the structures of rape culture altogether rather than to become implicated in them. When Sarah is put on the stand, she seems to find it impossible to state convincingly that she did not wish to be raped. Katherine responds by asking her, insistently, what had gone through her mind while she was being raped. "What were you thinking"? she shouts at Sarah. Sarah replies with one word: "No". At which Katherine return to her seat, satisfied that she has made her point. The only word that a woman can utter within the structure of rape culture is this one word of denial. Many feminist traditions have relied to some extent on such a unitary and static concept of sexual identity, since such gender identification most effectively allows a negotiation of women's experience of oppression. It is paradoxically, gender oppression itself, in continuing to make that unity felt, which provides impetus for resistance. However, buying into an essentialist understanding of gender could cost women the power to locate their own empowering points of resistance within discursive practices. It is this which happens within the viewing process of *The Accused*. My examination of *The Accused* functions, in fact, as a challenge to essentialist theorisation of gendered spectatorial identification. When one's analysis of the relation between gender violence and cinema incorporates an essentialist understanding of gendered identity, then its challenge to the social relations which give rise to such violence is to some extent sabotaged - no matte how insightful that analysis may be. Within such a theorisation, the power is already lost for women before the game of cinematic representation begins. Linda Williams points out that, within such a formulation,

... male-pleasure-in-looking struggles against the displeasure of the threat of castration in a static realm of iconicity that always constructs the image of the woman as an ultimately reassuring mirror of the man. Patriarchal power invariably wins; the struggle is over before it begins (Williams, 1990:165).

I would suggest that the illusionism of cinema is not problematic in itself. Rather than deny its pleasure, one might attempt to create a point of resistance within its relations of power.

This will only be possible, however, if one begins to question the differentiation between evidence and entertainment raised in this section, as the designation of biologically deterministic spectatorial positions.

It is clear that Mulvey is equating the "pleasure" of cinema with the "ease and plenitude" of its illusionism. By definition, then, spectatorial pleasure cannot be a tool of resistance and criticism - and the "pleasure of resistance" cannot be a spectatorial pleasure. I think that it is necessary to challenge this negativity regarding pleasure *per se* in order to propose a more satisfying feminist critique. As argued in Chapter 1, the limitations of feminist psychoanalytic film theory can be overcome through an emphasis on the instability of women's positions as spectators. It is within contradictory interpellation of women by the screen that one can find a powerful point of resistance within the spectatorial relationship. Instead of speaking of a denial of illusionism, one could see suspension of disbelief as the space in which subject positions are fought out and then closed off again.

To achieve an emphasis on the instability of women's positions as spectators it is necessary to examine the negotiation of meaning which takes place between the formal aspects of the cinematic text and historically positioned spectators. The only historically positioned reading of *The Accused* present in this chapter, however, is my own. This does not mean that I am making an equation between the subject constructed by the film and historically positioned viewers. My reading functions as an examination of the way in which the film constructs particular spectator positions. Chapters 6 and 7 will look at the reaction of a particular group of viewers to this reading of the film.

I have, in this first part of my thesis, examined feminist film analysis in terms of its potential as a powerful mode of intervention into gender relations. Chapter 1 pointed out that there is a weakness in film theory, represented by its disregard for the fact that viewers are active participants in the construction of meaning that takes place in spectatorial relations. Chapter 2 argued that this dismissal of the power of viewers is informed by a reaction, within a wider context of feminist debates, to internal conflicts in women's movements. These debates tend to disguise differences between women because they are viewed as a threat to the coherence of feminist positions of resistance. We saw that this concealment of differences leads logically to the weakening of feminist claims for the expression of their political needs and interests. I used the example of feminist sexuality debates, which, I proposed, tend to obscure the fact that women hold different positions within sexual politics. In masking such differences, these debates necessarily surrendered the claim for women's position as sexual

subjects. I suggested that the interpretation of spectatorial relations in film theory is informed by this strategy-operating as a renunciation of women's demand to be the subjects of pleasure.

The present chapter focused on the fact that the rejection of "feminist" spectatorial pleasure compromises the position of resistance offered by feminist film theory and that, for this reason, such analysis can easily be contained within the conservative frameworks it is designed to challenge. The ease with which such a containment of feminist critique takes place is illustrated, here, by means of an application of feminist film theory to the analysis of the conservative language of classical realist film.

Part 2 deals with the second aim of this study, which is to establish how feminist film analysis can achieve a more powerful impact on gender relations.<sup>19</sup> The arguments I have put forward so far lead me to conclude that this project should focus on the need, within feminist social criticism, to concede the differences between people of the same gender. Feminist film analysis, more specifically, needs to recognise that women take up various and historically specific positions within spectatorial relations. Such a recognition would necessarily demand an acknowledgement of the active role played by viewers in the construction of the meaning of films. This second part of my thesis attempts to formulate a strategy which could make possible such an acknowledgement in feminist film analysis. My discussion is not aimed at reformulating the theorisation of film referred to in this thesis. Instead, it attempts to establish a perspective which could potentially give rise to a new, widely-based culture of feminist media criticism-one which draws on the strengths of these theorisations but transcends its limitations. We will see that media education can present a valuable site for the development of such a culture of film analysis.

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<sup>19</sup> As in Part One, the term 'feminist film analysis' is used to refer to analysis based in the theory discussed in Chapter 1.

## **PART TWO**

### **FEMINIST COMMUNITY MEDIA EDUCATION**

**Establishing a forceful critique of representations of  
violence against women**

## MEDIA EDUCATION

### Exploring Possibilities

How different, in practice, is the well-meaning anti-racist teacher who demands an instant repudiation of, say, *Mind Your Language* from her/his Leavisite forebears, who taught about popular culture only in order that students should learn the shallowness of their pleasures and forthwith reject them? (Clarke, 1987:183).

In August 1994, I designed and facilitated a media education lesson, working with groups of students at Wynberg Girls' High School in Cape Town. I ran three versions of the media education lesson - with groups of Standard Sixes, Sevens and Nines respectively.<sup>20</sup> For the Standard Sixes and Sevens, I chose an advertisement for a Nashua colour photocopier, while the Standard Nines looked at an advertisement for the fast food chain, Steers.<sup>21</sup> The lesson dealt with the role played by South African television advertisements in the reproduction of oppressive representations - such as that of women and black people. It was designed to invite the students to critically discuss the power of visual imagery. It addressed the implications of the choices they make in accepting or rejecting certain representations of the world around them.

In all three cases, the students were highly consistent in terms of the attitude they adopted to the two advertisements. On the one hand, they found the process of discussing these texts exciting. They were able to recognise, in varying degrees, the prejudice inherent in the representations of categories of race and gender in the advertisements, and discussed these with enthusiasm. On the other hand, they also tended, at all three levels, to slip from viewing the advertisements as carefully constructed texts to regarding them as "real happenings". They argued, for example, that the little boy in the Nashua advertisements "simply forgot" to hand a valentine to the black children. This slippage was at least partly due to the students' lack of familiarity with the skills involved in media analysis. It was possible, however, also to recognise in this response a reluctance to accept the wider social implications of the texts. The dominant view expressed by these students was, in fact, that any criticism of the advertisements was of little relevance to the world outside the classroom. They tended to argue, in other words, that such representations had no significant effect on

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<sup>20</sup> In South African government schools in the Western Cape, the first two years of schooling are referred to as "Sub A" and "Sub B", while the third to the twelfth year are numbered from Standard One to Ten.

social relations.

In this chapter, I outline an approach to media education which corresponds with the theorisation of media politics developed in this thesis. At the end of the chapter, I apply the principles of this approach to a brief evaluation of the Wynberg lesson. By framing many discussions of media education in this way, I lay some of the groundwork for the exploration of the CAP course in the last three chapters of this thesis. The texts analysed in the Wynberg lessons played an important role in the CAP video workshop. Reference to the Wynberg lesson is therefore relevant to my discussion of the CAP course. A comparison between these two educational contexts becomes particularly interesting when one keeps in mind the "make-up" of the groups involved. While the CAP group was also exclusively female, they differed greatly from the Wynberg students in terms of other categories of identity, such as those of race, class, age and language. In context of these differences and similarities, it is possible to draw conclusions about the interests which inform the dynamics that occur within feminist media education lessons.

### **The role of media education in reformulating film analysis**

I have explained that one of the central aims of this thesis is to explore the role that film theory can play in establishing a widely-based culture of feminist criticism. I suggested that it is within the context of media education that film theory could present a valuable resource for the development of such a culture. One reason why I have chosen to focus on this context is because of a realisation that the conceptual apparatus of film theory is inseparable from the language in which it is formulated. It is written in a specialised vocabulary, accessible only to people who are versed in the application of sociological theories, semiotics and psychoanalysis to film. In directing itself at this small, specialised audience, film analysis reinforces the idea that only a few "educated" people can truly "understand" the way in which media works, and only they can play an important role in resisting its manipulative powers. The formulation of the discipline of film theory as a whole is therefore indicative of the approach to the role of viewers which I have criticised. In the light of this I would argue that a challenge to this approach should include an attempt to make film theory accessible to a much wider group of people. One site in which this disregard for viewers within the language of film analysis can be addressed is through media education, since this is a practice specifically geared towards making media theory accessible.

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<sup>21</sup> See Appendix A and B for detailed descriptions of these advertisements.



It does not follow, however, that the process of "translating" film theory into more accessible language will in itself acknowledge the power of viewers. Such an assumption would not be consistent with the interpretation of media theory-and feminist film theory in particular-developed in this thesis. I have attempted to avoid the assumption that film theory consists of a set of analytical tools which can be "transformed" into a valuable resource and then "applied" to the feminist practice of media criticism. I propose, instead, that theories about visual media form part of historically situated struggles around the reproduction of "subject positions" available to viewers. Feminist film theory, in particular, presents a struggle to establish coherent subject positions that might challenge those offered to women by dominant ideologies as reproduced in, for example, mass media and debates about the politics of media. Ironically, the disregard for the power of viewers in such theory represents a choice made within the context of a struggle to establish a coherent "feminist" subject position for viewers. The demarcation of a small, specialised audience for film theory through the language in which it is formulated also represents a calculated choice. My attempt to highlight the activity of viewers is intended as a challenge to these choices.

For my discussion of media education to remain consistent with my theoretical critique, I cannot assume that the problems I have identified can be addressed through media education simply by teaching the basic concepts of the discipline. Like film theory, media education cannot be viewed as a "toolkit". I would argue, rather, that models of media education also form part of struggles around the reproduction of the subject positions of viewers. I see two reasons why film analysis might be reformulated and enhanced by means of media education. Firstly, the problematic approach to viewers adopted by film theory finds its equivalent in media education theory. Because of these similarities, the flaws I have identified in the formulation of film theory can be addressed within the context of media education. Secondly, media education presents a more productive site for an intervention into these problems than feminist film analysis on its own. Such analysis often theorises in a relative vacuum on the subject positions offered to viewers. It tends, furthermore, to equate these subject positions with real viewers. Media education, in contrast, necessarily involved the presence of a group of viewers in the process of analysis. The chances of establishing an emphasis on the differences between the roles played by viewers in context of a particular, historically placed screening of a film are thus enhanced. Through this emphasis, one might develop a form of film analysis which draws on the power of "feminist" viewers.

I have noted that there seem to be significant points of similarity between the positions

of media education and that of feminist film theory. One parallel is that within media education theory there is a great deal of interest in the relation between media and violence-focusing on the "effect" of violent television images on children. We have seen that the disregard for viewers in feminist film theory is a calculated choice rooted in feminist sexuality debates. Chapter 2 argued that, within these debates, there is a tension between resistance to dominant ideology and internal struggles within women's movements. These two areas of conflict we, we saw, are interdependent: often, internal conflicts could only remain under control through a partial acceptance of conservative frameworks of social analysis. It also became clear that a crucial expression of this tension between resistance and internal difference could be found in concerns about the relation between media and violence-in this case, violence against women by men. I argued that the extent to which feminists accepted conservative frameworks of social criticism may be gauged by exploring the way in which they define this relation. In this chapter, it will become clear that the focus in media education theory on the relation between media and violence can be understood in similar terms.

My discussion focuses on debates around the integration of media education within secondary school syllabi. I have chosen this focus because, within these debates, one can clearly trace the relation between different models of media education and conservative frameworks of social criticism. It is also here that media education becomes closely linked to the issue of images of violence on television. In discussing these debates, I am therefore able to explore the parallels, referred to above, between media education and feminist film theory.

I will show that debates about the need for media education in secondary school syllabi forms part of a struggle around the public acknowledgement of the ideological operation of mass media. This is, ultimately, a struggle around the reproduction of the subject positions of viewers. I will focus, here, on two arguments for media education which hold conflicting political positions in relation to this struggle. The first model, which I refer to as "evaluative" media education, is clearly based in conservative interests. The second, which is represented by Len Masterman's discussion of media education, is an attempt to formulate a progressive alternative. I will argue that, with some readjustment, this second model could represent a valuable approach to feminist media education. Through my discussion of this model, I will outline the approach to media education which will form the basis of my critique of the CAP course.

## Media Education as a Site of Struggle

### Conservative media education: the role of 'discrimination'

There has long been widespread resistance to the idea of media education as a subject of study within primary and secondary schools, both in South Africa and elsewhere. Bob Ferguson writes, for example, that the development of media education programmes within South African Secondary School education has been sporadic and tentative. Response from some teachers to the introduction of Media Education into the curriculum has tended to be "... uneasy, or, alternatively hostile". Teachers questioned the inclusion of even more material into an already weighty teaching schedule-and also felt that they were unqualified to teach the new addition (Ferguson, 1991:12). Presumably the problem, here, is that media education was not prioritised as a subject in its own right: Ferguson points out that it was simply added into language syllabi as an extra teaching component (12). Such marginalisation of media education is also characteristic of the British education system. Murdock and Phelps conducted a survey in 1973, which found that eighty per cent of British grammar schools and forty-two per cent of comprehensive schools felt that their study of mass media had little or no legitimate claim to classroom attention (Murdock, et. al., 1973: Ch 5). Mike Clarke writes that this attitude could still be found amongst administrators, teachers and parents in the 1980's (Clarke, 1987:1). In *Postmodern Education*, Aronowitz and Giroux comment that such resistance has been characterised by the assertion that teaching materials relevant to the school classroom are those which provide the basic skills necessary for the job market (Aronowitz et. al. 1991:24). Proponents of this view do not regard the analysis of mass media - and even of cultural texts in general - as a matter of urgency, since such analysis is not immediately recognisable as a marketable skill. Strong support for this point of view has been one reason why calls for the integration of media education into school curricula have met with only marginal success.

In cases where media education has been grudgingly accepted within school curricula, it is designed to instruct students how to discriminate between media promoting "good" and "bad" values. The assumption is, furthermore, that mass media are necessarily "bad" and

should only be the subject of study so that students can discriminate between such texts and those of "true value". This model of media education therefore represents consent to a "necessary evil": i.e. that of allowing such unworthy material into the classroom. Ferguson states that within this approach, which characterised media education in British schools in the 1950's, "successful teaching meant that teachers stopped their students from catching terrible and usually unnamed diseases from the media" (Ferguson, 1991:20). Clarke refers to this approach as "evaluate" media education: a model which, he says, presents itself as the required "antidote" to the negative forces released through mass media (Clarke, 1987:3). Len Masterman suggests, similarly, that media as a subject of study in school tends to be an encouragement of what he calls the "inoculative" approach to media education, which operates to foster "discrimination" in students (Masterman, 1980:13).

Arguments for such education programmes often refer to the existence, in contemporary society, of a "cultural crisis"-represented by a generation of cultural "illiterates" (Aronowitz et al., 1991:25). The proliferation of electronic mass media is cited as, a cause of this crisis. In order to promote "cultural literacy", reform initiatives are suggested, "... bent on providing students with the language, knowledge and values necessary to preserve the essential traditions of Western civilisation" (24). The denunciation of mass media within evaluative media education seems to be inseparable from a reification of a second body of texts: that of this "Western intellectual tradition". Media education operates, here, to re-affirm the distinctions drawn between these two bodies of texts and the values attached to each.

This model of media education-and the school of media theory in which it is based-is clearly in conflict with the approach to media analysis adopted in this thesis. I have argued that mass media are informed by conservative economic interests, and present a site in which the reproduction of an ideological hegemony is constantly renegotiated. Within this process of negotiation, the power relations which exist in contemporary society are reaffirmed. Evaluative media education, in contrast, does not conceive of mass media as participating in the construction of social relations. Mass media are seen as a force which promotes values and attitudes which deviate from the principles of "civilised society". Such media education does not, in other words, admit to the fact that mass media play a central role in reproducing the power relations on which that society depends. The principles of this society are, instead, exemplified by a second body of texts: that of a "Western intellectual tradition". These principles are viewed, furthermore, as universal "truths" rather than historically specific ideas

informed by group interests. In this way, the possibility of looking critically at political interests which inform both the production and circulation of either group of texts is closed off.

The emphasis on "basic marketable skills" on the one hand and the prioritisation of cultural education within school curricula on the other seem to be in direct opposition to each other. I would argue, however, that this is a superficial contradiction: both positions are designed to ensure that education around cultural texts plays a highly conservative role in society - through the reproduction and promotion of a specific set of values. This underlying continuity becomes obvious when one recognises that schools have, in fact, always been the "sites of cultural production" of an ideological hegemony most often motivated by dominant economic interests. The focus on "basic skills" rather than cultural values could be said simply to represent a way in which conservative debates denied the role of schools in this process. Support for educational projects dealing with cultural literacy can then be understood as an acknowledgement of this long-established educational practice. I would propose that such acknowledgement occurs when it becomes too difficult to smooth over the contradictions on which the denial of political involvement is based. Challenges to the cultural values which are promoted in schools are sometimes so compelling that they need to be accommodated and conservative support for (discriminatory) education around culture may then be seen as one way of doing this.

The same seems true for the opposition between resistance to media education and the acceptance, by some parties within conservative education debates, of the need for evaluative media education. These two positions are both designed to ensure the survival of the values of "high" culture in the Western traditions. The reification of a "literary canon" depended, necessarily, on an exclusive of mass media from the classroom. This fact is not noticeable while challenges to the legitimacy of this tradition are easily deflected. At such a time, educators can afford to dismiss the importance of media education altogether. When, however, these challenges become too powerful to ignore, some conservative debates may shift their strategies by calling for media education.

Masterman points out that support for evaluative media education is expressed in terms of apprehensions about the moral content of mass media:

The birth of the whole discrimination argument in media education lay in a profound distrust of the media themselves. Traditionally ignored by the educational system, the mass media were drawn to the attention of teachers when they came to be identified as aspects of cultural decline, seducers of the innocent, and creeping diseases whose baleful influence clearly needed to be actively fought

by the teacher.... (Masterman, 1980:13).

I would argue that mass media has for a long time already been identified as a force bent on the destruction of society. The argument that the destructive nature of this force should be countered through media education is also not new. Leavis and Thompson's *Culture and Environment*, published in the 1930's, recommended, for example, the teaching of "popular culture" so that students would learn the shallowness of such pleasures and reject them (Leavis et al., 1984:31). The need to "deal" with this problem through education was, however, only prioritised when the distinction between mass media and "literary studies" became precarious. Since progressive education movements were now appropriating mass media as a legitimate object of knowledge, this distinction could no longer be maintained simply by means of exclusion. Media education therefore became appropriated into mainstream education. In this way, educators managed to re-establish, in new terms, the differentiation between literature and mass media, and the denial of the need for political analysis of either body of texts.

Challenges to the kind of cultural studies promoted in schools often include an attack on the distinction drawn, traditionally, between "high" and "low" (or popular) culture. Such challenges were formulated, for example, within the progressive educational movements rooted in the resistance politics of the 1960's and 1970's in the United Kingdom. Alan Sinfield explains that there was an influx, at this time, of students whose cultural background did not correspond with the accepted literary canon. Having turned to the education system because it seemed to be crucial to their survival, these students were faced by a canon of 'Great Literary Works', which tended to marginalise their own cultural experience. They responded by questioning the legitimacy of this canon, and arguing that "cultural deference had helped to keep the institution going, but at the same time university and school students had developed an alternative culture of their own, producing, increasingly, the confidence to challenge established culture (Sinfield, 1986:6). Students and educators argued that the texts which are relevant to their cultural experiences should be treated as legitimate objects of knowledge. Sinfield points out, for example, that students formulated their position within this struggle as a demand that the texts they study should be of immediate personal relevance rather than "... quintessential 'human' significance" (7).

Led by academic criticism to expect an engagement with the "human condition", and finding in fact some of the writing of certain class fractions in one corner of Europe during few hundred years, readers ask at least that it should say something to them (Sinfield, 1986:6).

Aronowitz comments that marginalised groups (such as the social movements of youth, race and feminism) challenged the relevance of basing educational curriculum exclusively on a Western intellectual tradition (Aronowitz et al., 1991:17). They demanded that these texts should form part of the curricula, so that education "... builds upon the tacit knowledge derived from the cultural resources that students already possess" (17). We can discern, within the demand for "relevant" texts, an argument for media education: electronically mediated "popular culture" should, it was claimed, be treated as a legitimate object of knowledge (15). It is in the context of these challenges that one must understand conservative acceptance of media education. Such criticism posed a threat to the approach to the teaching of culture promoted in mainstream educational institutions.

An example of the conservative response to this kind of demand can be seen within more recent shifts in debates around the issue of media education. Aronowitz and Giroux point out that, during the 1980's, a shift occurred within mainstream educational institutions, from the prioritisation of "job skills" to an emphasis on subjects which clearly do not fall into this category. They describe this as a move away from the prioritisation of the "needs of big business" to an "...overriding emphasis on schools as sites of cultural production" (24). The arguments put forward corresponded with the Leavisite approach referred to above. Some of these educators began to refer to the existence of a "cultural crisis", caused by mass media - and suggested that "cultural literacy" could be promoted by projects which aim to teach students the values of "Western civilisation". I would suggest that the shift represents a successful deflection of the threat which progressive movements posed to the claim of "universality" of conservative education. Aronowitz and Giroux's comments about these debates seem to bear out this suggestion. They propose that these shifts represent a change in strategy within conservative attacks on the "progressive education movement" (24). According to these attacks, it is progressive education movements who hold most responsibility for the "cultural crisis" in contemporary society (25). This claim could be interpreted as a response to the threat which progressive arguments pose to the legitimacy of conservative education debates.

Aronowitz points out that the recognition, within resistance politics, of culture as a site of struggle had a profound impact on the arguments put forward within progressive educational debates (24). This recognition has made their criticism of conservative approaches to the teaching of culture particularly compelling. It was in context of such criticism that there was intensive lobbying, throughout the 70's and 80's, around media

education in schools, and new curriculum in film-and media studies were introduced by teachers allied with the British Film institute. However, these activities have always been strongly contested, and the threat posed by progressive educational movements proved minimal. The discriminatory approach managed to re-establish its credibility simply by reformulating its boundaries. Progressive criticism has, therefore, never been compelling enough to transform the approach to education around culture in schools. I would propose that the reason for this is that such arguments often assume that the audiences of mass media are passive. In the next section, I will suggest that it is because of this assumption that the potential strength of progressive arguments around media education remain restricted.

### **Struggles around the subject positions of audiences**

I have explored, above, the political positions of two arguments for media education. We saw that most educational institutions accept the position that such teaching should enable students to "discriminate" between mass media and the texts of a "Western cultural heritage".

I have argued that this approach is informed by conservative cultural interests. We identified, further, progressive arguments for media education which attempted to challenge the authority of this discriminatory approach to mass media. These challenges took the form of a demand that texts studied in the classroom should be "relevant" to the cultural background of students-and should therefore include mass media. The criterion of relevance alone appears however to be inadequate as a challenge to the authority of the discriminatory approach. It is important to establish why this criterion has proved inadequate, and to propose a way in which it may form part of a more compelling argument for progressive media education.

I propose that these two arguments for media education form part of a struggle around the reproduction of the subject positions of the audiences of mass media. Viewed in the context of this struggle, it becomes clear why the argument for "relevant" media education falls short of providing a real challenge to the discriminatory approach. The discriminatory approach reproduces an understanding of media which insists that audiences are powerless to resist the manipulative effect of media. The demand for "relevance" also glosses over the dynamic relation between audiences and texts. Without such an emphasis, it fails to break out of the framework of analysis which it attempts to challenge. There is, then, clearly a need to formulate a challenge to the discriminatory approach which is based on an emphasis in the



active participation of audiences.

Alan Sinfield makes some valuable suggestions for alternatives to the demand for "relevance" in progressive debates around the teaching of culture. He contends that the demand for relevance does not present a sufficient way of challenging essentialist humanist literary criticism, since it is still caught within the assumptions made by this tradition. It simply restates in new terms the "primacy of the experiencing individual" - the notion of the writer and reader as the focus of meaning and the truth. Sinfield goes on to insist that it is important to emphasise the active, historically specific and varied role played by audiences within the construction of textual meaning. He comments:

Relevance is an inadequate working principle because it requires too little of text and reading. Pressed to its logical conclusion, it asks merely that texts give back to readers their current concerns; it protects readers from the challenge of other perspectives and leaves them immured in their own preoccupations (Sinfield, 1986:6).

Sinfield explains that an approach which does take cognisance of the dynamic relationship between text and reader would lead to a framework in which the meaning of a text is understood to be entirely dependent on its particular historical context. At the moment of its production, Sinfield asserts, the text should be seen "... not as reflecting a historical situation in its totality but as an interpretation and an intervention from a particular position in the social order" (Sinfield, 1986:8). Furthermore, as the historical context within which the text exists changes, so can its meaning:

The formal properties of the text ... appear as strategies which aim to make that preferred version vivid, coherent, persuasive ... Once it is in circulation, the text is also continuously reproduced - in changing times and places, including our own, for further purposes within developing institutions. We can have no innocent access to the text or to history (9).

According to Sinfield, the argument based only on a demand for relevance operates to "efface difference, and the factors that determine it", thus obscuring the fact that things may be "other than what they are" (7). He proposes that one should, instead, contemplate the factors that determine difference, and therefore the possibility that things might be interpreted differently. "Literature", he states "Y if we expect not universal truths but particular projects in particular historical conditions, can disturb and provoke us with attitudes illuminatingly different from our own" (7). An awareness of the factors that determine difference is, he insists, a prerequisite for political change. Such a framework of critique would present a powerful challenge to the argument that mass media has a destructive effect on our cultural heritage. Clarke explains that these apprehensions depend upon an understanding of media

analysis which neglects the active position of audiences in the construction of meaning:

This gradual decline [of society], leading to the end of civilisation as we know it, is only plausible so long as the image of all-powerful media and defenceless audience is retained. Admit to the possibility of "alternative readings" of media output, or audience resistance to certain kinds of ideas, and the whole edifice threatens to collapse (Clarke, 1987:179).

I would propose, then, that the criteria put forward by Sinfield would form a valuable basis for the development of a feminist approach to media education.

### **Pleasure, Violence and the Construction of Audiences**

What are the implications of the above discussion for developing a model of media education which is based in the approach to spectatorial pleasure I have put forward in this thesis. I have proposed that such an approach should emphasise the importance of acknowledging the role of viewers as agents of the construction of viewing pleasure. I will specifically explore the value of such a model for the discussion, within media education, of the representation of violence on television. This examination takes place in context of a critical exploration of Masterman's model of media education. I believe that this model provides a powerful progressive alternative to the discriminatory approach. It seems to me, nevertheless, that it is possible to improve on some of Masterman's assumptions. In particular, he employs the concept of relevance in a way that is similar to the progressive debates discussed above - and, in doing so, restricts the potential of his own approach. I will try to illustrate this point and suggest ways in which Masterman's approach could be modified.

### **Masterman's model of media education**

Masterman is very critical of the evaluative model of media education. He is particularly critical of the promotion, within such education, of a discriminatory approach to the teaching of culture. He explains, furthermore, that this approach does not restrict itself to a complete renunciation of mass media: it can easily accommodate a reification of a kind of "high culture" within mass media. Educators differentiate, here, between "foreign films and the classics of cinema" and the "popular media offerings most avidly consumed by their pupils" (Masterman, 1980:15). In his experience, pupils expressed as little interest in the first set of texts as they did in those of the literary canon: Ford and Hitchcock were "... as remote from them as Shelley and Keats" (Masterman, 1980:2). As an alternative to this, Masterman

proposes a model which emphasises semiotics. The role of media education becomes, within this framework, the "demythologisation" of mass media. He describes such education as follows:

[It is] a process which will reveal the selective practices by which images reach the television screen, emphasise the constructed nature of the representations projected, and make explicit their suppressed ideological function. Such an education will also necessarily be concerned with alternative realities - those constructions implicitly rejected, suppressed or filtered out by the images which appear on the screen (Masterman, 1980:9).

This approach sets out to make students critical of the apparent "transparency" of visual media: to make them aware of the way in which the conventions of realism smooth over the construction of meaning that takes place in such material. This is clearly a sound basis on which to develop a progressive model of media education. Semiotics could provide students with a language which allows them to become more articulate about the way in which they position themselves in relation to media.

Masterman also argues that instead of dealing with film "classics", media education should focus on texts which hold some relevance for students - and it should therefore be centrally concerned with television. He explains that the study of television is important because this medium forms a central part of students' experience. This, he notes, is also the conclusion of many other educators:

[I concluded that] film might be a less immediate, relevant and appropriate medium for classroom study than television. It was ... a conclusion also reached by many other teachers who have recognised that it is time to redress the balance, to respond more sensitively to the direct viewing experiences of pupils and to acknowledge the greater significance and potency of the television medium (2).

He comments, however, that pupils often express no more enthusiasm for the semiotic analysis of texts that are relevant to their experience than they do for discriminatory discussions. He feels that this is because educators find it difficult to illustrate the significance of the discussion of abstractions such as power and ideology to pupils' daily existence:

If media control or the "consciousness industry" are to become predominant concerns in media studies then proponents of this view will need to work hard to find ways of embedding their concerns within concrete experiences which are familiar, interesting and comprehensible to their pupils. There is no evidence that they have yet found a way of doing this (6).

We can see that, like the progressive arguments for media education referred to in the

previous section, Masterman's formulation proposes relevance as an alternative to discrimination. His argument is that relevance to the concerns of students should be a criterion for successful media education. He suggests that relevance such as this would ensure that students would be enthusiastic about discussing the ideological operation of mass media. It seems, however, that this combination is extremely difficult to achieve. Even if the texts under discussion are relevant to the concerns of students, it is still difficult to make students feel that discussions of power and ideology are of equal relevance.

I would suggest that the difficulty Masterman experiences, here, with making students enthusiastic about classroom discussions cannot simply be explained as a failure, on his part, to make these discussions "relevant". What he regards as failure could simply be a necessary characteristic of group dynamics within the media education classroom. I would argue, furthermore, that exploration of these dynamics themselves represents an exciting activity which should be central to the process of media education.<sup>22</sup> Unless one places emphasis on the dynamic relation that exists between the students as audiences and the texts which they study, the importance of this activity will not be recognised. This, I think is why Masterman expresses such disappointment with the implementation of his own model of media education.

In order to realise the full potential of Masterman's model, one would therefore have to re-evaluate its approach to the role of audiences in the construction of meaning. Masterman tends to view such audiences as passive - and this limits his understanding of the role of his own students in the media education classroom. He asserts, for example, that educators should simply "make students aware" of the ideological operation of media. The assumption, here, seems to be that such students are being "shown" that they have had a "false," view of the nature of media. It is important to acknowledge that educators cannot take up such a neutral, facilitating position. Teaching necessarily operates as a perpetuation of, or challenge to, power relations that exist inside and outside the classroom. The process of "making students aware" will, necessarily, be a power struggle.

Masterman's view of the power relations which exist in the classroom seems to issue from an attempt to create a space in which students can escape from the restrictions of the educational system. He finds, however, that those restrictions continue to intrude. In his account of these frustrations, he expresses disillusionment with his own efforts to offer his

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<sup>22</sup> I shall take up the complexity of these dynamics in my discussion of the CAP workshops in Chapters Five, Six and Seven. They involve full attention to the levels of media "competence" of viewers, as well as an exploration of the differences viewers bring to media texts (for example of class, race, gender and educational level).

students such freedom:

Far from being the liberating, radicalizing experience which they had in mind, many teachers discovered that the subject, through its institutionalisation, became ... an instrument of control ... when files needed to be kept up to date ... when the examination was used as a threat, and assessment - in spite of the teacher's better judgement - became a prime instrument of control; when the teacher found that he had to judge as well as teach his pupils ... on grounds which he knew had little validity and which said nothing of the ways in which he valued them as individuals; and when the teacher finally realised that the compulsion for using these mechanisms of control arose from his knowledge that it was he who was being assessed by his pupils' results, his subject had already become reified, inert an instrumental before his very eyes (2).

One could argue that there is an echo, here, of the attempts made within feminist movements to create a space free from power relations which are exploitative to women. Here, too efforts to create such a space will necessarily be frustrated. We saw, in the case of feminist debates, that a much more powerful position of resistance could be developed by exploring the contradictions within those relations of power. I think that an acceptance of the inevitability of the struggles that exist in the classroom would, similarly, offer a far more productive framework for a progressive model of media education. In a paper discussing the role of media education in South African schools, Jane-Louise Sutherland argues that it is important that teachers should acknowledge their own involvement in such struggles.

Just as it is important to understand the full implications of the ideological power of the media, so, too, must the media teacher confront the ideological power of education. As media teachers, we need to realize that education is never neutral, but instead political (Sutherland, 1991:21).

Such an approach could, I think lead to a more insightful understanding of the reluctance of students to discuss the ideological operation of mass media. It seems to me that, within such a framework, the lack of enthusiasm described above can be seen as a deliberate (even if unconscious) choice on the part of students to resist the analysis of texts that are relevant to their own experiences. Here, the process of "teaching" media education is clearly no longer a neutral activity: it becomes, rather, an active struggle between the various interests that are represented in the classroom. This includes the role of the teacher. I would propose that the students' resistance is a defensive response against interference with their pleasure in mass media. This is not, however, resistance by passive viewers to taking up a more active position in relation to media texts: their enjoyment of mass media forms part of an active construction of the meaning of such texts. Let us look more closely at the significance of this concept of active pleasure for progressive media education.

### Passive pleasure versus active education

Arguments for discriminatory education around culture are often formulated in terms of an opposition between discernment and pleasure. Such arguments express faith, for example, in the "sound" educational value of the texts that constitute a school syllabus, and apprehension about the dangerous effects of the pleasures provided by mass media outside the school. In *Culture and Environment*, Leavis and Thompson refer to the texts that make up the traditional school curriculum as offering "... perhaps the beginnings of an education in taste". Outside school, however, students are seen to be exposed to the exploitation of films, newspapers and other forms of mass media which seduce them into choosing the "cheapest emotional responses", satisfaction at the "lowest level", and the "... most immediate pleasure, got with the least effort". In order to save students from such material, they must be "... trained to discriminate and resist" (Leavis et al, 1948:3-5).

The argument that mass media are destroying the "civilised" and principled aspects of society seems to depend, in fact, on a strict opposition between active education and passive pleasure. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman writes that television is "... laughing the traditional classroom out of existence". It promotes a particular orientation towards learning, which is "... by its nature, hostile to what has been called book-learning or its hand-maiden, school-learning". Its principal contribution to educational philosophy is the idea that "... teaching and entertaining are inseparable" (Postman, 1986: ). These comments illustrate how crucial the opposition between education and pleasure is to the authority of the discriminatory approach. I would suggest that this opposition is crucial to the reproduction of a subject position for audiences in which they are viewed as powerless with respect to the manipulative effect of mass media. Ferguson points out that it is exactly in such a way that Postman defines the viewer. "Postman's conception of the audience", he explains "is one where they are the ghosts at the feast. He writes about them rather than researching with them" (Ferguson, 1991:79).

From the above, we can see that the pleasure/education dualism is also an opposition between passive reception and active participation. This dualism includes an opposition between the compliant pleasure of enjoying the immediacy of visual media versus the discernment of the distancing abstractions of media analysis. We find an example of this version of the dualism in Postman's proposal that media education should train students to "distance themselves" from the manipulative effects of "entertainment". It can also be seen in Leavis's comment about the "effortlessness" of enjoying media versus the bracing experience

of being "trained to discriminate and resist". Within this framework, viewing pleasure cannot in itself be a form of resistance.

The dualisms of pleasure versus education and passive reception versus active discrimination form part, I think, of a conservative approach to the illusion of concrete realism that visual media is able to create. I would suggest that a model of media education which represents a serious threat to the discriminatory approach would have to include a challenge to these oppositions. It would, above all, have to provide an alternative to the idea that the production of viewing pleasure involves an interpellation of powerless viewers. In previous chapters, I have proposed that the creation of the illusion of realism is dependent on the co-operation of viewers who deliberately "suspend disbelief" in order to experience its pleasures. This pleasure is, furthermore, a sphere in which viewers explore the contradictions within which they live. The process of exploring the structures on which the illusion depends is not, therefore, in itself in opposition to the pleasures of viewing.

One could argue, in fact, that the problem with the Leavisite model does not simply lie with its emphasis on "fostering discrimination" in students. Clarke points out, for example, that while educators did become very critical of these terms by the early seventies, and also of the term 'Great Tradition', they did so only to take up a different set of values by which to discriminate, based on "... judgements about social value in struggles against oppression" (Clarke, 1987:6). Clarke suggests that the issue is not whether or not to discriminate but how to discriminate (7). From his discussion, it would appear that what makes the conservative model of media education objectionable is the fact that it illustrates to students the need to reject the "shallow" pleasure in certain texts. This, he suggests, could be done not only in the name of the 'Great Tradition' but that of 'Political Correctness'. A teacher could, for example, "... (manoeuvre students) into a corner from which there is no honourable escape" by forcing them to admit that their partiality to particular television programmes signifies complicity with "racist" attitudes. Such an approach leaves them with a choice of either abandoning their interest in the programme out of a sense of guilt, or "... (asserting) a hitherto unsuspected agreement with racist assumptions" (Clarke, 1987:183). Clarke points out that there are strong similarities between this kind of education and that of the model proposed by Leavis and his followers:

How different, in practice, is the well-meaning anti-racist teacher who demands an instant repudiation of, say, *Mind Your Language* from her/his Leavisite forebears, who taught about popular culture only in order that students should learn the shallowness of their pleasures and forthwith reject them? (183).

To return to Masterman's problem, it would seem that simply replacing one form of "discriminatory" analysis with another (albeit 'politically correct') will continue to alienate students from production participation in such activities. Both strategies tend to treat viewers as the passive dupes of powerful texts. Both also ensure that students feel ashamed and guilty of their pleasures in viewing popular media.

It seems to me that a different approach to viewing pleasure offers a way of solving this problem. When demonstrating to pupils the relevance of discussions of ideological operation of media, Masterman refers to the tension which exists between this process of analysis and the seductively "involving" experience of viewing media:

[There] is a genuine difficulty in relating questions of organisational structures or patterns of control to the direct experience of the pupil ... connections can be made and investigations can even be undertaken ... but the fact remains that media products, because they are immediate, concrete and involving are more intrinsically interesting to most pupils than media structures which are necessarily covert and abstract (Masterman, 1980:5-6).

Masterman is clearly referring, here, to the "illusion of reality" which visual media is able to create. He comments that pupils find the experience of this illusion "more intrinsically interesting" than uncovering the "necessarily covert and abstract" structuring of that impression of reality. Their resistance to being "made aware" of the ideological operation of media can be explained, then, as a reluctance to give up the pleasure of viewing. Masterman's approach to the illusionism of visual media is, I think, consistent with that of psychoanalytic film theory, which explains the realism of visual media as an effect dependent on spectatorial pleasure. In Masterman's case, this is understood, I think, as the pleasure of "false consciousness". He seems to be suggesting that pupils are placed in a position where they have to choose between this pleasure and the less "frivolous" benefits they would gain from learning the skills of textual analysis.

It is true that many people find that the political analysis of mass media destroys the pleasure of viewing. In my experience, people often view pleasure in visual media as something private, and understanding attempts to involve them in the analysis of such media as an invasion of their privacy. This defence of the private space of entertainment probably formed part, I would venture, of Masterman's pupils' resistance to the semiotic analysis of media texts. They may have regarded such texts as part of a domain that belonged to a part of their social existence which takes place outside school and which, as such, falls beyond the legitimate concerns of the classroom. If entertainment media form part of a private sphere—a last resort from the public world of social criticism—then the possibility of criticising such



media is closed off. We have already seen that both traditional disregard of media education and the discriminatory model of media education are geared towards such a closing off of critical discussion. The dualistic opposition between viewing as political resistance and viewing as private pleasure is obviously a serious problem that needs to be addressed. One could argue that it is because of their investment in this conservative framework that the students Masterman speaks of are unenthusiastic about the semiotic analysis of mass media. In order to appropriate spectatorial pleasure as a site of resistance for progressive media education, one would have to make an intervention into this process of investment. Through such a venture, we can begin to take account of the fact that media education is not a neutral, facilitating activity but an active struggle between the various interests that are represented in the classroom.

### **Images of violence and the renunciation of pleasure**

I have asserted earlier that various theoretical approaches to images of violence are revealing of their political positions. We have seen that the discriminatory approach to media education operates on the assumption of a highly passive subject position for the audiences of mass media - and that an argument about the destructive "effects" of mass media on society plays a central role within its strategies. This argument is, in fact, often expressed in terms of apprehensions about the manipulative effect that visual images of both violence and sexuality have on children. Clarke comments, for example, that studies which deal with this issue have repeatedly caught public attention:

... in the area of audience research which still receives more public attention than any other, namely the quantitative investigation of the effects of sex'n'violence on television, the hypodermic image is still paramount: researchers still avidly pursue the proof of a direct link between images in programmes and subsequent behaviour, invariably in children (Clarke, 1987:175).

Mass media is regarded, by such studies, as quite simply bad for our mental health. Some studies argue that images of violence on television "cause" violence in society. A slightly more sophisticated argument is that such images " ... are endorsing a world in which repressive, anti-social acts are made acceptable (34).

Clarke's discussion suggests that an evaluation of these kinds of studies should include an examination of the political motivations of supporters of such research, who frequently use what Clarke refers to as the "... often very dubious findings" as evidence for campaigns for increased censorship (175). This approach is reflected in general public opinion on the subject, which Clarke states, is "... to remove from public availability all material which

would be 'unsuitable' to children" (176). He refers, an illustration, to the response of the Daily Mail of 30 June 1983, which responded to a parliamentary enquiry by calling the effects of video material the "rape of our children's minds" (177). John Fiske also points out that studies informed by the "process" school keep returning to the issue of the "effect" of televised violence on the receiver, proposing a direct link between the two.

He asserts that the "semiotic" school of thought leads to a very different understanding of the issues involved:

The semiotician would argue that if the reader is moved to violence, then we must look for the causes in his or her socio-cultural experience as well as in the television message, and that no account of change of this message will, by itself, reduce violence in society" (Fiske, 1990:190).

Criticisms of "effects" research are, however, often regarded as "... academic nineties and feeble, last-ditch arguments raised by intellectual defenders of the corruption of youth" (Clarke, 1987:176). This reaction seems close to the lack of enthusiasm of Masterman's pupils in the semiotic analysis of mass media. The "feebleness" of semiotic arguments is due to the fact that they have not been able to make powerful enough intervention into this widespread "commonsense" regarding the effects of violent imagery. One reason for this is, I think, that semiotic analyses often still accept some of the main precepts of this approach. We have noted Masterman's reluctance to acknowledge the existence of power relations in the classroom which is closely tied to both an undervaluing of spectatorial pleasure and a passive idea of viewers. It is no surprise, then, that Masterman sees television audiences as interpellated into a state of "false consciousness". This issues in the attitude that the pleasure experienced from watching images of violence is necessarily "wrong", and must be renounced. Clarke points out that, since its inception, the crime genre has been politically sensitive, perceived as having an intimate relation with contemporary views about law and order. He suggests that it is therefore not enough to categorise such material as "inherently reactionary":

So, perhaps all crime programmes are relentlessly illiberal, and should be eschewed by all right-thinking people. Where does that leave those of us who, along with millions of others, enjoy them? Are we all lost causes if we do not renounce our pleasure (Clarke, 1987:45).

I would suggest that, through the pleasure of watching violence, audiences are able to explore aspects of the power relations in which they exist. One should, therefore, formulate ways of exploring and discussing both the pleasure and anxiety generated by watching violence. Media education lessons could, for example, be designated around the analysis of various

kinds of media representations of violence. Participants could then be asked to compare their own responses to these texts: when do they find themselves repelled by images of violence, and when do they enjoy such images? It would be important, here, to find a way of addressing judgmental attitudes which are likely to emerge regarding the enjoyment of such images. Through such an exploration, participants could begin to become conscious of the complexity and ambiguity of the relation between images of violence and "real" violence. They would, furthermore, be given the opportunity to face up to their own responsibility for determining the nature of this relation. In Chapter 7 we will see that the CAP participants expressed pleasure in certain images of violence while condemning others. I will show, in my discussion of these responses, the value of the approach to media representations of violence that I am suggesting here.

### **Conclusion: Revisiting the Wynberg lesson**

It seems valuable to conclude this chapter by returning to the media education lesson at Wynberg Girls' High School. In shifting between discussing the advertisements as constructions and becoming involved in them as "real happenings", the Wynberg students seemed to face two options which are very similar to the choice between analysis and pleasure. I would argue, however, that the students' tendency to slip from textual analysis to complete involvement in the advertisements which we were discussing was not rooted in lack of interest in the analytical process. They were, in fact, clearly enthusiastic about the critical discussion of the advertisements. It seems to me, furthermore, that one should not approach the resistance from these students to the process of media analysis as an expression of "false consciousness". It represents, rather a deliberate resistance by students to entertaining values which clash with their own interests and needs.

I would say that this response was strongly informed by the political interests which were represented in these classrooms. The role played by such interests can be illustrated by looking at the differences in the various standards' responses to the media education lesson. When I ran the lesson with the Standard Sixes and Sevens, the students immediately commented on the gender roles attributed to the various characters. I found, however, that they had to watch the Nashua advertisements three times before noticing the exclusion of the black children, and did so only after comparing it to the "improved" version. The Standard Nines also immediately commented on the sexism of the Steers advertisement. In this context, their responses to the two advertisements appear to be rooted in a tendency, for this

particular sample of viewers, to be more concerned about the politics of gender than that of race.

In order to appreciate the importance of this point, it is useful to look at the media education lessons in relation to the more general context of Wynberg Girls' High. Although the school is still largely "white", it also contains a sizeable percentage of "coloured", Indian" and "black" children. Racial identity seemed to affect classroom dynamics to some extent; there was definitely a tendency amongst the pupils to group themselves according to these categories of race. My general impression was, however, that teachers and students did not want to articulate these divisions. Race as a category was assimilated into the school's culture with what at least appeared to be relative ease-so that racial differences became, in some sense, invisible. One reason for the apparent ease of this assimilation was, I think, that the make-up of the school is in fact remarkably homogeneous when viewed in terms of categories of class, with the pupils coming mostly from middle-class families. At the same time, race, as a category of identity, was representative of deep divisions and conflicts existing within South African society. In this context, the lack of awareness of racial divisions can be interpreted as forming part of a general (albeit unconscious) resistance, amongst both students and teachers, to any critical discussion of the political implications of their immediate social environment. One could argue that because of shared economic interests, many teachers and students have invested in an ideological framework which is geared towards protecting that environment from the possibility of social change.

This analysis of the dynamics existing in the school throws some light on the students' responses, described at the beginning of this chapter, to the media education lesson. Their reluctance to accept the political implications of media analysis is consistent with their resistance to the exploration of social conflict. It is, I think, because of this resistance that their critique of the texts tended to focus on gender rather than race. Gender analysis could, within the single-sex context of this school, easily steer clear of any real conflicts existing within this particular group of viewers. A discussion of race could, on the other hand, lead to an exploration of social differences existing within this group which the students had for the most part learnt to ignore.

The point of media education cannot, in other words, simply be the teaching of skills, in which people "become aware" of the ideological operation of texts. It is, rather, a process of engaging in a struggle between conflicting interests. Media education becomes, here, a deliberate attempt to renegotiate the ideological framework which is established in the

classroom. Such tension can surely be put to productive use.

I have explained that the last three chapters of this study deals with the CAP women's media course. We will see that the CAP group's critique of the Steers and Nashua advertisements was the reverse of that of the Wynberg students: they prioritised the discussion of race over that of gender. At the same time, they, too, easily slipped into talking about the characters as if they were "real people". I would say that this similarity is due to the fact that, in both groups, gender was a category of sameness, while race was one of difference. I will illustrate, in my discussion of this workshop in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 that, like the Wynberg students' comments, these women's responses to the advertisements was also informed by resistance to the exploration of social differences that existed within their group.

My discussion of the CAP women's media education course represents an application of the arguments I have put forward thus far in this thesis. Through this discussion, I hope to demonstrate some of the pitfalls and possibilities of feminist media education as encountered in one concrete situation. Here, a group of progressive media educators with varying degrees of knowledge of the theories outlined in this study attempt to contribute to the raising of the media awareness and skills of a particular group of South African women. In the course of my discussion of the CAP workshop, I attempt to address both sides of the media education equation - the "teachers" (who bring to the situation their own theories, models and agendas) and the "students" (who come to the experience as fully constituted and active viewers of media, with often unsettling consequences for dynamics of the whole process).

## THE CAP WOMEN'S MEDIA EDUCATION COURSE:

### A Case Study

*This way of looking [at ourselves] is coming from somewhere else. These pictures tell us that a real woman has her bones sticking out all over. Does she look like an ordinary woman that we would see in our streets?*

[From: minutes taken at a workshop which formed part of the 1993 CAP women's media education course]

In the October 1992 edition of *Xha*, two photographs appear, printed next to each other.<sup>23</sup> The first is a close-up shot of Madonna (or a look-alike), framed to show her head and upper body. Her low-cut dress merges into the dark background, while her breasts and face are sharply highlighted. She is wearing a large set of headphones. Underneath the picture *Xha* has printed a subtitle: "Want me - want the product! Picture from radio 702 Ad."<sup>24</sup> The second is a three-quarter shot of an emaciated old woman. A group of people crowd into the background, appearing to watch her and the photographer with amused interest. Here the subtitle reads, "Poverty is a marketable product. Picture from news item on Somalia". The pictures have clearly been juxtaposed because of a remarkable similarity in the stance, expressions and gestures of the two women. In both cases, it is easy to conclude that they are striking exaggerated poses for the benefit of the photographer. Madonna is leaning forward so that one looks down her cleavage. Her head is thrown back to expose her throat, and she is wearing what is probably supposed to be an expression of sexual pleasure: eyes closed, lips parted and smiling. Her hands are clasping her breasts. The second woman is also leaning towards the camera, hands at her breasts. Her face seems to express suffering; she frowns, glancing away from the camera, her lids lowered, the corners of her mouth turn down. The smiling response behind her, however, seems to indicate that she is at least to

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<sup>23</sup> *Xha* was the newsletter of the Western Cape Media Trainer's Forum - a structure which has now dissolved. Its work was taken over in 1993 by the Western Cape organisation, the Community Media Network (COMMNET), which in turn gave way in 1995 to the National Community Media Forum (NCMF).

<sup>24</sup> In the original advertisement, the photograph was subtitled with the words, in quotation marks: "THE MOST POWERFUL SEXUAL ORGAN IS THE BRAIN".

some extent also putting on a show for the camera and the crowd.

The photographs accompany an article describing a course organised by the CAP media project.<sup>25</sup> According to the article, the pictures had originally appeared, respectively, on pages 17 and 18 of the South African independent newspaper *The Weekly Mail* of September 4th, 1992. When reading this newspaper, one first saw the Radio 702 advertisement and then, on turning the page, immediately faced the news photograph. The *Xha* article goes on to discuss the pictures as examples of the representation of women in mainstream media, using this commentary to explain the nature of, and need for, the course.<sup>26</sup>

I took part in the development of this course, which took place during 1993. It consisted of a series of workshops, running over seven weekends and dealing with a range of media such as radio, television, newspapers, video, and women's magazines. The workshops took place in context of a critique of "... violence against women and its coverage in the media" (*Xha*, 1992). As such, it provides me with a suitable case study through which to explore the practical implications of the issues raised in this thesis. My two final chapters will therefore be devoted to a discussion of the CAP course. The co-ordinators of the CAP project intend, during 1995, to initiate a second project which builds on the experience of the women's media course. My evaluation of the course takes place in context of the need to develop a set of guidelines that CAP could refer to in this second phase of their project. These guidelines will hopefully also be of use to other attempts to develop feminist media education projects. I arrive at these suggestions by exploring patterns of vested interest and processes of struggle within the CAP course, thus illustrating the position of the course within the politics of media education. Reference to this analysis will, I hope, enable one to approach a project such as the CAP course with a greater degree of awareness of the political implications of the strategic decisions made in its planning and facilitation. Also, by pointing

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<sup>25</sup> The Community Arts Project, which was formed in 1977, is a progressive non-governmental arts organisation dealing in non-formal education and resource provision.

<sup>26</sup> See Appendix E for a copy of these photographs. The *Xha* article is available at Community Arts Project's offices in Salt River, Cape Town, bound into a volume containing a range of material generated around the CAP women's media education course.

out both the strengths and weaknesses in our approach, I pinpoint ways in which these patterns and processes might be dealt with in future feminist community education projects.

In formulating this discussion, I realised that the two photographs mentioned above were expressive of the role played by the CAP course in the politics of media. They represent a particularly valuable reference point for my exploration of the assumptions and expectations that informed the development of the course. I will therefore return to these photographs, illustrating their significance to the CAP course.

It seems useful, at this point, to offer a brief synopsis of my arguments in the thesis thus far, linking them to this particular project.

In Chapter 1, I discussed definitions of gendered identity in terms of their value for the development of forceful intervention into exploitative gender relations. I argued that essentialist concepts of gender jeopardise the potential strength of such interventions. My elaboration on this argument in Chapter 2 took place in context of an examination of cultural feminism. We saw that this tradition of feminist activism defines gender oppression as the oppression of women by men. Liberation from gender oppression is then understood as a liberation from men. It is this essentialist premise which leads to the central aim of cultural feminism - the liberation of women from dominant "male" culture through the nurturance of a female counter-culture. I argued that this view cannot accommodate the inevitability of gendered power relations *within* that counter-culture. It cannot, for example, address the fact that a variety of contradictory interests will affect its construction of gendered identity. Such feminism tends to establish a sense of female solidarity at the expense of acknowledging differences between women. We saw, for example, that solidarity of this kind contributes to the marginalisation, within feminist movements, of certain social identities - such as that of black and gay women. In this chapter and the next one, I will propose that the central flaw within the CAP course derives from a similar essentialism in our approach to gendered identity. I will illustrate this point by means of a detailed examination of the way in which we interpreted the advantages of excluding men from the course. We will see that facilitators presented these advantages in terms similar to those of cultural feminism - that is, as a



contribution to the nurturance of a female counter-culture which liberates women from dominant "male" culture. I will propose that, within this approach, it remains impossible to acknowledge that *even within a women-only course* the existence of unequal gendered power relations are inevitable. We did not acknowledge, above all, that the CAP course operated partly as a struggle around the reproduction of gendered subject positions offered to the audiences of mass media. This, I will argue, hindered the realisation of the potential of our exclusive focus on women.

This chapter is divided into two parts. Section A deals with general discussions which occurred within CAP correspondence and the minutes from the weekly meetings of the facilitators of the course.<sup>27</sup> These discussions represent an ongoing process of re-definition and critical evaluation that took place around the CAP project. They reveal, I think, that the course forms part of the struggles, described in the previous chapter, around the reproduction - and transformation - of the subject positions offered to the audiences of mass media. Section B deals with one particular section of our preparation for the course, i.e. the design of the two-day workshop which focused on video material. The video workshop included a slot on *The Accused*, the film used in Chapter 3 to illustrate the implications of feminist film theory for debates around violence against women. It also included sections dealing with the film *Thelma and Louise* and two advertisements - the video material which formed the basis of the lesson referred to in Chapter 4 in my discussion of models of media education. My evaluation of the design of this workshop will take place in context of the guidelines developed in Part 1 of the chapter.

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<sup>27</sup> The term 'facilitator' was adopted in the course to refer to the people who ran the workshops, while the women at whom the course was directed were called 'participants'. These terms were thought to be more appropriate than, for example, 'trainers' and 'trainees'.

## A: Designing the CAP Course

### The CAP course's focus on media production skills

#### Teaching women media production skills

In CAP correspondence, the media education course was given the working title *Speaking Out Against Violence Against Women: Interpretations and Possibilities: a Multi-Media Course for Women* (CAP correspondence, 17 Sept 1992).<sup>28</sup> This rather lengthy title gives some idea of the interests and aims of the project co-ordinators. It reveals, first of all, one of the most significant decisions made in the formulation of the target group for the course: that only women would be allowed to attend. There was a general agreement amongst facilitators that this decision would not be compromised: one would assume, therefore, that it is representative of interests and aims which were central to the formulation of the project.

One needs to look carefully at the way in which we justified the restriction in order to establish whether it represents a sound strategic decision. Chief amongst the aims of the project was a determination to "empower" women (CAP minutes, August 14 1992).<sup>29</sup> It is important to ask, here, *in what way* the exclusive focus on women would lead to their "empowerment".<sup>30</sup> It seems to me that our arguments in support of this stipulation were characterised by weaknesses similar to those I have identified, in Chapter 2, within feminist movements and, in Chapter 4, within progressive media debates. Above all, we failed to acknowledge the inevitable existence of gendered power relations between people-whether they are of the same gender or otherwise. I will argue that this failure seriously hinders the realisation of the potential value of media education directed exclusively at women.

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<sup>28</sup> The correspondence referred to here is available at Community Arts Project's offices in Salt River, Cape Town, bound into a volume.

<sup>29</sup> The minutes for the facilitators meetings are also included in the volume referred to earlier, which is available at CAP's offices.

<sup>30</sup> Within CAP meetings, the word "empowerment" was not used in any rigorous manner. It referred in a general sense to a process through which people gain access to resources which enable them to develop greater control over their circumstances. The implication seemed to be that this process is generally facilitated by people who have greater access to these resources.

The argument for the restriction seemed to be, firstly, that the course was specifically designed to address women's lack of access to media production. It is pointed out in the funding proposal for the CAP course that, in South African society, women have very little access to media production<sup>31</sup>:

Overall discrimination against women in South Africa is such that they play virtually no decisive role in the production of mainstream media, and a minimal role within the "alternative" media (CAP proposal, 1992).

One reason for this, the proposal comments, is that women rarely have access to existing programmes in media-related skills training. The proposal then suggests that the fact that women are "underrepresented" leads to their being "misrepresented" in the media, and that this tends to perpetuate their exploitation in society. It is for this reason that there is a pressing need to give attention within the framework of community media education to the question of women's "... access to, and control of, the means of communication". The CAP course would set out to provide a group of women with these skills to enable them, as stated within this proposal, to "participate more fully" in work around media (CAP proposal, 1992).

Against the background of women's lack of access to media production skills, it seems to make good sense for the CAP course to focus exclusively on the training of women. The suggestion here seems to be that women trained in such skills could produce media which creates a greater visibility for their experiences. This emphasis on the need for more women to publicly declare their experience of their social environment seems particularly appropriate to a project addressing the issue of violence against women. Such declarations could, for example, lead to a greater visibility of women's experience of abuse, and thus present a challenge to "rape myths" such as the one which argues that women "ask" to be mistreated.

The proposal's argument in support of this focus is, however, problematic. We have seen that this argument is informed by concerns about the *inaccuracy* of the representation in mass media of women's nature and needs-referred to as the "misrepresentation" of women. The suggestion is, furthermore, that more "accurate" representations of women could serve to address exploitative gender relations. The CAP proposal draws a relation between the inaccuracy of images of women in mass media and their lack of access to media production -

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<sup>31</sup> This proposal is available at Community Arts Project's offices in Salt River, Cape Town, bound into the volume

referred to here as their "under-representation" in the media. It is argued, implicitly, that the most direct approach to providing more "accurate" images of women is to allow women more access to media production.<sup>32</sup>

It seems to me that this argument simply rejects one idea about what women "really" are in exchange for another. It still refers to a pre-social, already-existing gendered identity - arguing, in other words, that there is one "true" set of experiences for women. This obscures the fact that women hold various and changing positions within gendered power relations. It obscures, furthermore, the fact that women can invest in these power relations, and then actively participate in their perpetuation. I will try to show, in this chapter, that we would have been able to address the acquisition of media production skills by the women on the course - and the role of such "skilling" in challenging violence against women-in a far more incisive manner if these two issues had been acknowledged in the approach to gendered identity.

The second argument which emerged from our discussions in support of an exclusive female target group was that women are "empowered", within training contexts, by the very absence of men. The exclusion of men would help to ensure that women are provided with an opportunity to articulate their own view and to play an assertive role in group activities in a way that they would not otherwise find possible. It was reasoned that within community organisations (as with most other institutions), men tend to occupy the "leadership" positions. Men are, furthermore, in general far more confident than women about their own insights and abilities and are therefore inclined to dominate any organisational activities. When women separate themselves from men, it was argued, they therefore have more of a chance to take up positions of authority (CAP minutes, August 14, 1992).

This argument is, again, a convincing one. In my own experience, women often state that they feel more able to take up an active role in groups consisting only of their own gender. The truth of this statement would, of course, often depend on the activities in which such a group is involved. The CAP course dealt with the acquisition of technological skills-

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referred to in earlier footnotes.

<sup>32</sup> This argument is similar to the "sociological" feminist critique of media described in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

an activity in which many men do, indeed, often take up a more dominating role than women. The course dealt, furthermore, with the discussion of the issue of violence against women-and the approach to this subject is certainly likely to be crucially affected by the presence or absence of men. I would however caution, again, that it is important carefully to examine our arguments in support of the notion that the exclusion of men from the course would be beneficial to the women's ability to involve themselves in these activities. The CAP course did not allow for the existence of exploitative power relations *amongst* women-grounded in categories of identity such as race, class, sexuality, education, language, political affiliation, motherhood, marriage, physical beauty, age, and geographical location. These relations of power could equally have a detrimental effect on the ability of some of the women to experiment with the acquisition of technological skills, or to express their own thoughts on the issue of violence against women.

One could respond to this criticism by saying that the exclusion of men made these differences more manageable, ensuring at least one common denominator amongst participants: that of their gender. It remains true, however, that the feminist framework in which the project was based did not take into account the active role that *women* play in the reproduction of exploitative power relations. I would argue that, if the course had acknowledged this role, the exclusion of men could indeed have served as *one way* in which to ensure a space within which activities could take place which challenge conventional notions about women's abilities, experiences and needs. Without such acknowledgment, the value of a "women-only" course remains limited.

I argue, above, for an understanding of gendered identity which acknowledges that women hold *various* and *changing* positions within gendered power relations. This framework also accepts that women often *actively perpetuate power relations that are exploitative of themselves and other women*. The importance of these comments grows clear when one becomes aware that women who take part in a project such as the CAP course will inevitably do so for very different reasons. The development of such a project will, in other words, necessarily be informed by conflicting interests. The achievement of the objectives of the facilitators will, for example, often clash with those of the participants. Such differences

need to be acknowledged, and structures should be set up within which they can be accommodated.

One way of evaluating the success of the CAP project in setting up such structures would be to look at its accommodation of race as a category of difference between the women on the course. I will explore, in the section below, the way in which we referred to categories of racial identity to differentiate between on the one hand the participants and on the other the facilitators of the CAP course. In this way, I will illustrate the drawbacks of the approach to gendered identity which was adopted within the course. This discussion will throw new light on the significance of the two photographs that appeared in *Xha*. Does the juxtaposition of race and class in these two images of women have any relevance for the power relations which existed between the facilitators and participants in this course?

### **Teaching "black working class women" media production skills**

We have seen that the CAP course was geared towards women's acquisition of production skills. In formulating a "target audience" for the course, the co-ordinators were in fact more specific: CAP wished to address the training needs of a particular social grouping of women.

"To change matters at the root," states the *Xha* article,

women must become makers of media in their own right, in particular those who are "media irrelevant" as a consequence of their class, their race ... or their non-conformity. (Xha, 1992).

It would seem that the first two of these categories are prioritised in the formulation of the project. According to the funding proposal for the course, the exclusion of women from the production of media is particularly the case for "black working class and rural women", who "... experience almost total media invisibility and silence":

It is therefore essential that an ... intensive training schedule is planned, prioritising black, working class women and developed within the context of a broader programme which addresses all aspects of discriminatory practices against women in the media field. (CAP proposal, 1992).

The CAP course would be geared towards "empowering" women who fall into these social groupings to "participate more fully" in media production. One could say that this

commitment was concretised mainly in our definition of the target group for the course - which was to consist mostly of "black working class women".

We approached the planning of the course as if this definition of the target group was a given which would direct any other decisions we would make. It seems to me, however, that in many ways it was the membership of the *facilitators'* group which directed our design of the course - *including* the decisions we made about the membership of the target group. This, I think, was inevitable - but it was never acknowledged in our discussions. In the discussion below, I will illustrate this contradiction - and explore its implications - by looking at some of our deliberations about the issue of racial identity.

In light of our commitment to the "empowerment of black working class women", deep concern was expressed by some members of the facilitators' group about the fact that its membership included very few "black" people. One facilitator went so far as to ask that it be minuted that she would decline from further participation in the project if we did not find a way of including far more "black" women as facilitators. This stance was accepted as a valid one by the facilitator's group as a whole, who agreed that the project's commitment to the training of "black working class women" was put into question by this "racial profile" of the facilitator's group. In order to "empower black working class women", people who fall into this category of social identity should, it was agreed, at every opportunity be given the chance to take up positions of authority-including that of the design and facilitation of a project such as the CAP course. In light of this, the absence of "black working class women" from the facilitators' group also lessened the chances of gaining a great measure of trust from participants about the project's commitment to their "empowerment". In this context, it was thought unlikely that facilitators would gain access to, and in this way insight into, the concerns of women in "black working class" communities around the issues dealt with in the course. This would mean that the project could only have a very limited success in addressing these needs and concerns.

At the same time, even though these issues were seriously considered, it seems significant that they were raised only by facilitators themselves. One would have to reflect seriously on why the women who took part in the course as participants never commented on

the matter. I would suggest that, even though we as facilitators accepted that the "racial profile" of our group was an inadequacy, we never provided a space within which our membership could be challenged in earnest. Despite our qualms, the membership of our group—that is, the fact that few of us were "black"—was a *given*. One could argue, in fact, that the *membership of the facilitator's group determined the nature of the participants' group*. This point can be illustrated by looking at what the realisation of the course's target group came down to in practice: the formulation of a set of entrance requirements for the course.

In our deliberations about this issue, we stumbled almost immediately on the difficulty of formulating a policy around the language fluency required of participants. Even before looking at the preferred language of the participants, it was necessary to confront the fact that English was the only language that all the *facilitators* spoke fluently. This state of affairs was directly related to the fact that few of us were "black". It was conceded, however, that women trained in media skills and media theory are at present generally "white" and middle class. As a starting point, the CAP project would therefore have to accept that the course would be presented mostly by "white" women, and in a "white" language<sup>33</sup>. In this context, participants would therefore need to have a "working knowledge of English", although interpreters would be provided and written material would be translated to Xhosa (CAP minutes, August 20, 1992)<sup>34</sup>. We can see, then, that our decisions about language requirements were determined by the membership of the facilitators' group.

The clumsiness which the use of quotation marks around the racial terminology lends to the above discussion reflects, I think, the discomfort with which we approached the subject of race. One could argue that even though the facilitators' group as a whole accepted the criticism of certain facilitators referred to here, we were intensely aware of the simplistic assumptions which informed the racial terminology that was being employed. The crudity of such terms became particularly obvious, for example, when facilitators voicing this criticism

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<sup>33</sup> I think that facilitators would in fact have agreed that English is not an exclusively "white" language in South Africa. The point was, I think, that it is not specifically a "black" language.

<sup>34</sup> There was never any suggestion that translation into Afrikaans was a priority—even though Afrikaans was the first language of many 'Coloured' members of the group. One reason for this may have been that there was a tacit understanding that these women would be fluent in English.



stated that the term "black" excluded "coloured" and "Indian" women-referring, rather to "African" women (CAP minutes, August 27, 1992). At one point it was explained, for example, that people who fall into the latter racial categories of identity do often obtain positions of authority within non-governmental organisations such as CAP. Presumably the need to "empower" "coloured" women is therefore regarded as less urgent! The point of this statement was that although some facilitators fell into these categories of racial identity, we could not refer to this fact in support of the "blackness" of our group. Although no criticism of these kinds of statements was ever publicly voiced, I would judge that many of the facilitators would agree that this approach to "affirmative action" is very simplistic. What interests me most about our discussions is that we *nevertheless accepted the validity of the criticism*.

It should be clear from the above that, since one of the goals of the CAP course was to teach participants media skills, it was very likely that the majority of facilitators would be "white". As stated above, women trained in media skills are at present generally - amongst other categories of social identity - "white and middle class". The idea for the course grew, after all, from a determination to address the unequal distribution of skills - and on the most immediate level, this would mean a sharing of skills between "white" and "black" people. The long-term objectives of the CAP project was, furthermore, to encourage participants to take up the role of facilitators in future training projects. A close look at the structuring of the course also indicates that facilitators were determined that participants would play a decisive role in the development of the course<sup>35</sup>. It is, therefore, puzzling that we felt such discomfort about the "racial profile" of the facilitators' group.

One can begin to trace the source of these tensions by exploring the difficulty we experienced with another aspect of our deliberations about entrance requirements: the educational level of participants. The problem here, as stated in the minutes of one of our first meetings, was that we needed to "... take into account the inequalities that exist within the South African educational system". People who attended the course would necessarily

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<sup>35</sup> The first few days of the course focused, for example, on a negotiation amongst participants and facilitators of a set of 'ground rules' and 'objectives' for the course, and these were regularly re-evaluated.

come from various "educational levels". Nevertheless, in order to enable the facilitators to "pitch" the course at a coherent educational level, a "cut-off point" needed to be established. It was suggested, within this particular meeting, that the participants should at least have passed the equivalent of a Standard Six examination. This suggestion was, however, thought unsatisfactory by most of the facilitators, since it was felt that one could not establish the level of education of an applicant by looking at her formal schooling. How does one accommodate, within such measures of evaluation, women who have many years of organisational experience and no schooling? Why should the inability to read and write exclude one from participating? And, if we stipulated a minimum educational level so that we could pitch the course at a coherent level of complexity, should we not also establish a cut-off point about the maximum educational level that participants would be allowed? These questions resurfaced at various points in the development of the project, and there seemed to be no easy answers (CAP minutes, August 20, 1992). Again, as with the evaluation of the racial identity of the facilitators' group, we felt uncomfortable about our inability to reach any real consensus on this issue.

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, skills training in media production represented only one part of the educational goal of the course. An equally important aim was to provide participants with knowledge about what can be referred to as "media politics". Our deliberations, above, about the required "educational level" of participants was one of the few instances in which our formulation of the course was clearly informed by concerns about this aim of the course. It was felt that, in order to have discussions about the ideological operation of media, one would have to assume a high level of education amongst participants. At the same time, we felt that this demand clashed with our commitment to the "empowerment" of women who did not have media production skills.

Our failure to resolve this issue points, I think, to an inability to acknowledge some of the central motivations behind the course. We have seen, above, that in developing arguments in support of the value of an exclusively female target group, we referred primarily to the first aim of the course: that of production skills training. This does not mean that our

decisions remained uninfluenced by concerns about the second aim - i.e. that of education in feminist media analysis. The way in which this second aim informed our deliberations was simply not often consciously articulated. The conflict which surfaced within the context of our discussion of the educational levels of participants was one of the few discussions in which this issue began to find conscious articulation.

We have seen that weaknesses in our arguments surfaced within our attempts to relate the "under-representation" of women in media production to their "misrepresentation" in the media. The problem surfaced, in other words, when we tried to draw a relation between the issue of production skills and that of media analysis. In the next section of this chapter I will attempt to show that it is in context of the relation that we were drawing between these two areas that we were unable to acknowledge some of the key motivations behind the course.

### **The CAP course's focus on feminist media education**

It seems to me that the CAP project's approach to differences between women is *inconsistent*.

Although the course was characterised by a tendency to disregard differences between women, there are also important areas in which the course did address these differences. This becomes clear when one draws a distinction between the facilitators' approach to media production skills training and the way in which we understood media education. Here I define "media skills training" as training in skills focusing on the process of producing texts, while "media education" refers to education focusing on the analysis of texts<sup>36</sup>. In the discussion below, I will show that our inability to acknowledge conflicts of interest within the course can be traced to our approach to the second category.

The CAP course was centrally informed by the need for the production of media which would address "... women's needs, issues and position in society" (CAP proposal, 1992). We saw that, on the level of skills training, the project's attempt to address this issue

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<sup>36</sup> This distinction is made for the sake of simplifying the terms of the arguments I am presenting here. I would in fact accept that media production in itself includes analysis, and that media analysis can in itself be seen as a way of re-producing the meaning of the texts under discussion.

was *defined* in terms of social differences between facilitators and participants. These differences were, after all, a direct result of the central motivation behind the course: i.e. to address the unequal distribution of skills.

At the same time, the project co-ordinators were acutely aware of the fact that the production of feminist media would not be ensured simply by training women in production skills. This point is emphasised in the *Xha* article:

To make media, [women] need to learn how. But ... if they are to challenge the power structures that dominate the media they need more than training programmes which simply open their doors more widely to women, without changing their content ... (Xha, 1992).

The implication, here, is that the "power structures that dominate the media" tend to restrict one's ability to produce texts giving expression to women's interests. The "content" referred to here is clearly the political frameworks within which training programmes are based: frameworks which do not allow for women's points of view in media production. It seems to me that the CAP project was informed by a realisation that the creation of such media necessarily forms part of a process of ideological negotiation that constantly takes place around the reproduction of power relations that are exploitative to women. It exists, more specifically, in context of the negotiation of this process of reproduction by the institutions of mass media. If we wish to produce media which makes a forceful intervention, we could benefit greatly from improving our grasp of the politics of mass media. The development of analytical skills in this sphere would allow us to recognise political implications of the decisions made in the production of media, and thus enable us to make a more powerful intervention. With this in mind, the course attempted to integrate the skills training with media education. Feminist analysis of mainstream media was to play an important role in this process. The course would deal with what was referred to in facilitators' meetings as "consciousness raising" about the role of media in the perpetuation of exploitative gender relations. "As women," the *Xha* article states, "... we need to sharpen our understanding of how the media is playing back images about ourselves" (Xha, 1992).

In the previous section, it became clear that in designing the course, we were assuming that once women had access to media production, they would be able to introduce a

more "accurate" representation of women in the media. Women's "voices" would, by their very nature, represent a *feminist* intervention into the operation of media politics. To this argument one can now add the idea that, because of the manipulative effect of mass media, women need to "learn" about the nature of their experiences and needs. They need, in other words, to work hard at establishing "authentic" women's voices. It begins to become clear that, when we were dealing with the issue of production skills, the social differences between participants were simply a logical effect of the nature of the course. It was in the areas of media analysis that these differences became a "problem" for us. The notion of accuracy which we employed in our understanding of the representation of women could not be reconciled with an acceptance of the differences between women.

I would submit that, in practice, the media education that formed part of this course did not operate as an uncovering of women's true experiences, of their "authentic" voices. *The facilitation of media education was, rather, an attempt to create a coherent "subject position" that could challenge those offered to women by mass media.* One could, in fact, argue that the definition of a target group for the course represents our attempt to create this "subject" for our "discourse" of feminist media education. In this context, it becomes clear that the definition of the target group as "black working class women" is not fully accounted for by saying that women falling into this social category were the ones most in need of skills training. *The image of a "black working class woman" was also a symbol which represented to us a powerful point of resistance to the one offered by mainstream media.* It is partly for this reason that this hypothetical black working class woman's "invisibility" within mainstream media is pointed out; to make her central to the project is to show up the "gaps" in the discourse offered to us by mainstream media. (Note that the word "us" can be seen, here, to mean "us, the facilitators on the project"). It seems to me that, in constructing a subject for our discourse of feminist media education, we were in fact attempting to redefine ourselves. It is this concern, I think, that lies at the root of our concern about the "whiteness" of the facilitators' group.

We can see, then, why it was within the sphere of media education that the race and economics position of facilitators cause them discomfort. It becomes understandable why it

was also here that differences of class, education, race, sexuality etc. within the participants' group became a problem. One could argue that this discomfort resulted from the need to present the symbol of "black working class women" as a coherent subject position. The differences between women on the course were perceived as a threat to the establishment of such coherency. It also becomes understandable why-despite our insistence that the nature of the course was determined by the needs of the target group-we did not ensure that participants took part in the deliberations about the design of the course. Long before encounters in the meetings and workshops themselves, within which these two groups met and discussed issues, the nature of the project was formulated in such a way that it offered participants "subject positions" which they could accept or resist.

It seems to me, however, that the above still does not fully account for the fact that we viewed social difference as a threat to the coherency of our critical analysis of mass media. These differences could, after all, even have played a positive role within our establishment of such a challenge. The response of the facilitators therefore needs further explanation. I would argue that this explanation can be found within the tradition in community education from which the CAP project originates. The criteria which this tradition applies to an educational project which is initiated by one group of people for the "empowerment" of another. The assumption is that the initiators should play a "neutral" role, their own interests should not interfere with the central aim of "empowering" that group. They should have as little impact as possible on the decisions made about the project, apart from giving the target group access to a set of options that they can realistically choose between.

I would propose that the problems which we experienced with the relation between skills training and media education would be resolved if the legitimacy of this tradition was seriously reviewed. In the last section of Part 1 of this chapter, I will look at the CAP course in terms of such a process of reassessment, and offer some solutions to the dilemma presented here.

### **The CAP course's commitment to neutral facilitation**

To begin to resolve the dilemma I have sketched in my discussion of the course so far, I now

turn to an issue raised repeatedly within discussions around the project. It was pointed out on various occasions that initiators of the CAP programme were, as usual with such projects, from "outside" its "target group" (CAP minutes, November 12, 1992). One could identify, within these comments, concern about the fact that such outside facilitators are often involved in community education projects because of their own agendas rather than a pure commitment to addressing the needs of the target group. Such agendas may be "personal": a facilitator could, for example, be guilty of what was referred to as "careerism". Facilitators were often also criticised for prioritising their own "political" agendas (such as a specific feminist view of the role that media education should play in a community) over the concerns of the target group. The assumption, here, is that, within the educational process, facilitators should attempt to remain politically neutral.

It is, however, impossible to eliminate power relations within a project such as this. Such a project will not only contain conflicts of interest between participants but also between facilitators, co-ordinators and funders. The existence of these interests cannot be avoided - and it is inevitable that these groups make interventions into the social relations that exist within and around the group they aim to "empower". It is therefore not surprising that, as CAP facilitators, we did not measure up to the criteria of neutrality which we demanded of ourselves. I have argued, above, that we were not involved in the project only because we wished to "empower" the participants but also because of our own interests. I would say that this fact made us uncomfortable, because of our adherence to the tradition referred to above. The conflicts of interest within the structures of the course could not be eliminated. We saw, after all, that in terms of skills training it was defined by racial and economics difference. Facilitators responded to this inevitability by disregarding differences between the women. It was for this reason that we adopted a framework within which we were unable to acknowledge conflicts of interest between facilitators and participants. I would argue that it is this denial of our personal motivations which undermined our sensitivity to the differences which existed on the level of skills training.

It seems to me that it is partly because of the inability of the CAP course to recognise that skills training is in itself politically biased, that their approach to media analysis remained

at an inarticulate level. I have argued that both media education and production skills training are necessarily politically biased-and can be feminist. Both can make important interventions into different aspects of media politics; the two areas should be seen to balance each other as distinct but interacting feminist facets of the course. Here, my argument about the exclusive focus on women within the CAP course is again relevant. A skills training programme could be termed feminist because of such exclusion, since it aims to ensure that women have access to production skills usually reserved for men. The exclusive focus on women is, however, not enough to make such skills training a powerful feminist intervention into existing systems of control over production skills. The skills training should in itself be *feminist* training. It would need, for example, to address women's lack of confidence in learning technical skills, in stating their own views, etc. It should attempt to define feminist methods of media production, which take account of gender dynamics.

The problematic nature of the assumptions we were making were, in fact, frequently acknowledged within evaluations of the CAP project. As it was explained to me, facilitators cannot "... make themselves completely invisible". It was also conceded that one could not simply argue that such programmes should only happen if they are the sole initiative of the target groups themselves. The target groups of such projects are, after all, usually defined by their lack of resources, and such initiatives are therefore unlikely to occur without the support of, for example, outside funding. Furthermore, such groups contain complex power relations in themselves, and its members have disparate experiences and interests. Once this is acknowledged, the concept of "community" education created outside the context of power relations becomes questionable.

Concerns of the above nature nevertheless hold validity, and are especially serious in light of the fact that large sums of money are allocated to such projects by funding agencies in the name of community resource development-when, in fact, they often serve very little purpose to the community in question. There is clearly value in the concern about conflict between the agendas of "outside" initiators and those of "target groups". This value lies, however, in pointing out that facilitators tend to make assumptions about the needs of the target groups *without consulting them*. When consultation does take place, it is often of very



little value because no sound relationship of trust has been established between facilitators and the target group. Moreover, assumptions about the needs of the target group are often not even spelled out amongst the facilitators themselves. Decisions therefore result from vague, well-meaning "intuitions" about the right way to do things. Such a project cannot result in education that is of value to the group for whom it is supposedly intended.

I would argue that facilitators should acknowledge and take responsibility for the fact that they are making an intervention into the social relations that exist within and around a target group. A process of negotiation should then be established between facilitators and the target group, in an attempt to accommodate the priorities of both parties. One should not, therefore, try to avoid the struggle between different interests that I have identified within the CAP project's definition of a "target group". These struggles are inevitable and need to be acknowledged in the strategic development of the project.

I explained at the beginning of this chapter that my concern about the assumptions of the CAP course originates, partly, from the fact that the project was viewed as a springboard for the creation of a more extensive, long-term training programme. It was seen, firstly, as a forum which could hopefully support the development of a culture of feminist media education in Cape Town. It was hoped, secondly, that the course would form the basis for the development of a more ambitious training programme which would "... enable women to professionalise their media activities" (CAP proposal, 1992). This plan was informed by the knowledge that women who work in media production often end up in environments dominated by very conservative political values, and where they have very little decision-making power. It would therefore, not be enough merely to provide women with skills in media production and feminist analysis; one should also create a structure which could act as an intervention into the power relations within which institutions which produce media are based. The CAP course was seen as a forum in which to generate ideas about the possible nature of such structures.

As such, the formulation of the course should be evaluated not just in terms of its immediate aims but also in terms of its worth as a starting point for further feminist media education projects. One would also have to decide whether the approach developed with the

CAP project would lead to a methodology which might form the basis for a general culture of feminist media activism. It seems to me that a women-only course *could* present a valuable starting point for the development of such a framework. It could, however, also lead to an approach which remains caught in a very limited understanding of the nature and concerns of feminist media politics. In order to prevent this from happening, one needs to confront the two main weaknesses I have identified in my discussion of the project: the insistence on "accuracy" as an accurate criterion for the representation of women, and the inability to accommodate the notion of differences between women. Without such an emphasis, the approach taken in the CAP course could lead to a framework which would be unable to accommodate areas of feminist media politics which, in my judgement, are of crucial importance. It would, for example, remain unable to address the fact that *both* women and men are oppressed as gendered subjects in contemporary society. There is, also, an urgent need for the development of an approach to feminist media activism which can address the fact that women who do have access to the production of media in South African society tend, amongst other categories of social identity, to be urban, free of disability, young, "educated", English-and Afrikaans-speaking, middle-class, and to present themselves publicly as heterosexual. The media produced by these women often perpetuate worldviews which are to the disadvantage of other women.

The significance of my evaluation of the CAP project can be illustrated by again looking at the two photographs in the *Xha* article. By juxtaposing the two images, the article makes a powerful statement about the representation of women in mass media. It seems to me that this statement is created through the play of concepts of difference and similarity presented by these images. On the one hand, the differences between the two women is striking. At the same time, there is the arresting correspondence in their postures - which, in both cases, seem to be a reaction to the camera. Here, the two photographs represent not difference but similarity. We become aware that neither of the women is "real": they are both simply media images, objects to be consumed by the audiences of mass media. They represent two extremes of roles offered to women in our society: a beautiful, young, white sex symbol versus an old black beggar-woman. Most women would find themselves unable

to identify with either of these extremes. As such, we become aware of a "gap" which exists in the representation of women by the media. We become aware, in other words, that most women are not represented by these images-they remain invisible.

It is significant that race and class should play such an important role in this play of difference and sameness. It seems to me that these categories could play a valuable role in our approach, in the CAP course, to the critique of mass media. There is a great deal of potential in this play of difference for a powerful feminist intervention into the operation of mass media. We could, however, only make full use of this potential if we resolved the difficulties we ourselves experienced in accepting the role of these categories of difference.

In the second part of this chapter, I will look at these issues in relation to the design of the two-day section of the course dealing with video images.

### **B: Designing the CAP Video Workshop**

One of the workshops which formed part of the CAP course dealt with printed media. During the course of this workshop, participants looked at some images of women in South African documentary photographs and magazine advertisements.<sup>37</sup> The facilitators asked them to point out images of powerful women, and to rank these in terms of the degree of power represented by each. The most popular image turned out to be a photograph of a night worker on her hands and knees on top of a large boardroom table, polishing its surface. Next in line was an image of a woman kneeling in the dust, crushing grain with a stone. A third choice was an advertisement for a cereal, in which a woman smiles into the camera, holding two children close to her. The facilitators were taken aback by this selection. They pointed out that there had been other photographs which, in their view, were more appropriate choices-these showed, for example, an old woman making a speech to a crowd, and a woman looking up from her reading in a room filled with books. Why, they asked the group, did they prefer images which are symbolic of roles that women are forced to fulfil to their own

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<sup>37</sup> See Appendix E for examples of the photographs used in the CAP magazine workshop.

detriment? Powerful women, the participants replied, are those who would do anything to protect and improve the quality of life of their families-especially their children. The facilitators were not convinced by this argument. In a steering committee meeting which followed this workshop, they suggested that the CAP course should challenge the criteria which the women were applying, here, in their evaluation of media images. They proposed that these criteria revealed a misconception of the relation between control and responsibility in the women's definition of access to power and that the CAP project should offer them guidance in this regard (CAP minutes, July 1993).

I would propose an alternative approach which does not view the selection of photographs as "misguided". Rather, it is seen as an indication of a calculated investment in a set of values-those around motherhood-through which some women can indeed gain a significant degree of power. The set of values applied in the selection of photographs could, then, be seen as one which gained dominance within the group rather than representing the views of all the participants. Not all of these women would, after all, benefit from investing in these particular values. Within this interpretation of the workshop, an attempt to persuade the women to apply a different set of criteria in their evaluation of the images would not be a way of "correcting" their "errors". It would, rather, represent a further facet of the struggle between different vested interests within the group.

In the previous section, I explained that CAP views the women's course as the first phase in a long-term project. By looking critically at their experience of running the women's course, they hope to establish guidelines for the further development of this project. My examination of the CAP course is intended as a contribution to the formulation of these guidelines. It is in this context that my critique of the CAP facilitators' meeting, above, takes place. It seems to me that the view expressed within this meeting-i.e. that people are manipulated by media into a state of false consciousness and that the aim of media education is to "conscientise" them-was one which generally informed the CAP course. My alternative interpretation of the workshop illustrates the approach to media education for which I am arguing in this thesis. *This approach emphasises that media education is not a process of "enlightenment" but rather a struggle, between conflicting interests, around the construction*

*of meaning.*

These approaches to media education are based in fundamentally different feminist frameworks of social analysis. One very important difference between these frameworks can be seen in their approach to conflicts of interest between women. The two evaluations, above, of the selection of photographs illuminates this difference. We say that the facilitators' evaluation disregards the fact that the women had, to different degrees, invested in the values of motherhood and the family. The previous section proposed that the project as a whole was characterised by this inability to accommodate the fact that the women held very different positions within gendered power relations. I argued that this inability was fundamentally linked to the essentialist concept of gender in which the framework of analysis of the project was based. We saw, furthermore, that our discomfort with differences between women can be traced to our commitment to skills training and media education as "neutral facilitation", in which only the interests of participants should be taken into account. The framework for which I am arguing stands in direct opposition to this approach. It assumes that feminist interventions into power relations are particularly concerned with a struggle around the reproduction-or transformation-of the gendered subject positions offered to women. One of the central premises of this framework is that this intervention will inevitably include conflicts of interest *amongst* women.

The present section continues this examination of our approach to conflicts of interest within the course. I have dealt with this issue by examining the steering committee's diagnosis of the problems involved in the management of the course. I will now evaluate our solutions to some of these problems in the context of the last workshop within the course, which dealt with video.

By looking at the goals we set ourselves during this preparation for the workshop, I will demonstrate the implications of my argument that feminist media education projects should be based in a conscious negotiation of the power struggles which exist amongst those who take part. In doing so I will look, again, at two aspects of our approach to gendered identity: our insistence on accuracy as a criterion for the feminist critique of media, and the definition of women's liberation as an escape from gendered power relations. Chapters 6 and

7 will then look, in the context of this discussion, at the process of running the workshop.

### **The design of the workshop**

In my discussion, below, I will refer to two separate sets of guidelines developed for the design of the video workshop. The first set was established by the steering committee of the project, while I developed the second to guide my own input into the design of the workshop.

One important source for the development of both these sets of guidelines was the workshop on printed media-and, in particular, the activity dealing with the selection and organisation of photographic images of women.

It is useful to look at the influence of this workshop activity on the two sets of workshop guidelines referred to here. In the introduction to this chapter, I compared two evaluations of this activity, illustrating their alliance to very different models of media education. We saw that these evaluations pointed to conflicting approaches to the role played by viewers within the construction of the meaning of media. They were, furthermore, expressive of divergent approaches to the existence of social differences between the women on the course. In my discussion, below, I will explore the influence of these evaluations-and the models of feminist media education in which they were based-on the guidelines developed for the video workshop. We will see that, for the steering committee, the participants' responses within this activity was seen to illustrate problems which existed in the CAP course-problems which were then addressed in their guidelines for the video workshop. In my own evaluation, the participants' responses illustrated the potential value of this activity and I tried to draw on this value within the guidelines I developed for the video workshop.

### **The steering committee's guidelines for the video workshop**

It is important to note the context within which the CAP steering committee established guidelines for the video workshop. This workshop was scheduled to take place just before the final section of the CAP project.<sup>38</sup> It was the last "educational" component; the final

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<sup>38</sup> Four media workers were responsible for this workshop: Andrea Fine planned and facilitated the first section, which needed her specialised training in drama; Nicky Newman took charge of the technical side, i.e. the filming and development of video tapes; Miki Van Zyl and I designed and facilitated the workshop as a whole.

weekend would simply be an assessment of our success in achieving the goals we had determined during the planning and running of the course. The video workshop was therefore the only space left in which to realise these goals. Because of this, we attempted to find a way in which this workshop could dovetail with the course as a whole by addressing some of the general questions which had emerged from previous workshops. Preparation for the workshop therefore included a discussion in which facilitators reviewed the way in which the project as a whole had progressed up to that point. In this meeting, facilitators pointed out areas which they felt had not yet been addressed in an adequate manner, and which this last workshop should therefore attempt to deal with. Within this discussion we returned, repeatedly, to the workshop dealing with printed media.

Firstly, facilitators expressed disquiet about statements made within this workshop by participants within the analytical discussions of media. The women were quoted as saying, for example, that "... no-one would be so silly as to really believe a Jungle Oats advertisement" and that they "... watch *Loving*, but it doesn't affect [them]". According to the facilitators, these statements point to the prevalence of an underlying assumption, amongst participants, that they were not affected by the ideological operation of mass media: this only happened to other, less "conscientised" people. The facilitators suggested that, far from being unaffected by media, participants were still "too involved" in the values and attitudes presented to them by mass media to recognise that they were oppressive to women. They referred to the selection of photographs described in the introduction to this chapter as an example of this inability. They suggested that, in order to make participants aware of the ideological operation of media, it was important to emphasise media education within the video workshop.

It became apparent, secondly, that facilitators were concerned about problems experienced, within the course, with the integration of skills training and media education. Attention veered back and forth between the two categories and, in fact, tended to settle back onto the first. It would seem that the workshop on printed media had been one of the few places in which enough attention had been given to media education. In the light of this, it was suggested that the video workshop should try to balance these two spheres in a way that

favoured media education.

Thirdly, a recommendation was made specific to the context of education around video, relating to the nature of the moving-image media to which women on the course were generally exposed. Within workshop discussions, little interest had been expressed in cinema, although it would appear that most of the women regularly watched television. It was therefore suggested that our workshop should focus on this medium.

The final suggestion made within this discussion relates to what Chapter 5 referred to as a "central impulse" behind the course: the determination to increase participants' ability to "speak out" about their own viewpoints. Apparently the participants felt that even before dealing with media production skills, more attention needed to be given in workshops to their ability to speak in public. They referred, for example, to the difficulties they experience in expressing their opinions at public meetings. It was felt that we should, therefore, attempt to deal with this issue in the video workshop (CAP minutes, July 1993).

Based on these four suggestions, we developed a broad outline for the video workshop. We decided that the bulk of the weekend would consist of the viewing and analytical discussion of material of the kind which is broadcast on South African television. During the course of the two day workshop, a video would also be produced featuring the women themselves.

It is common practice within community education projects to video workshops activities. Usually, however, this simply means that someone who knows how to use a camera records, for future reference, the events which take place during workshop activities. In planning the workshop, we were deliberately avoiding this approach-since it only allows a very passive role for participants in the filming process. We intended, rather for participants to play an active role in the production of video material. We also decided that this material would be played back to the women during the course of the workshop. This, we hoped, would allow them to draw a relation between the analysis of television that would take place during the workshop and their responses to their own material.

Within the limitations of a single weekend, this format seemed to offer ways of accommodating the four concerns which had been raised in the preparatory meeting. The



idea of balancing material taped from television with footage recorded on the weekend enabled us to deal with the first point: we could integrate the discussion of video production with that of the ideological operation of television - while emphasising the latter. By drawing a relation between these two kinds of material, we could also steer the discussion of television away from the "effect" of mass media on other "less conscientised" people to a more self-aware, and self-evaluative, approach. The use of footage featuring the women themselves made it possible to address the third point: it allowed participants to explore the implications of making public statements about their own identity by means of video. We also met the fourth requirement by focusing primarily on television material.

### **My own guidelines for the video workshop**

It should be remembered, here, that I wished to find a practical application for the approach to feminist film theory developed in the first three chapters of this thesis. This application was to take place in context of media education which addresses violence against women. I was particularly interested, here, in exploring the practical implications of my critique of the concepts of the "male gaze" - and, within this, the role of "spectatorial pleasure".<sup>39</sup> I kept these goals in mind within the guidelines I developed for the design of the video workshop.

The facilitator's meeting referred to above played an important role in the development of these guidelines. The issues raised in this meeting helped me to formulate practical solutions to the problems presented by the application of feminist film theory to media education. Of particular use was the facilitators' description of the workshop activity dealing with the selection of photographic images of women. We saw that this activity also played an important role within development of the steering committee's guidelines. However, because of the differences in our approaches to media education, our evaluations of this activity influenced the guidelines we developed in very different ways. It seemed to me that, through the selection and grouping of the photographs, participants were able to take a highly active role in the negotiation of the "meaning" of these images. Participants were free

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<sup>39</sup> See Chapter 1 for a detailed discussion of these concepts.

to negotiate which criteria should be applied to the images and to the relations drawn between them. This approach stands in direct opposition to the model of media education promoted within the CAP course - within which, we saw, participants merely "become aware" of the "truth" about mass media. The role of facilitators is, here, to introduce participants to this truth. It is because of their adherence to this model, I think, that facilitators were troubled by the participants' selection of photographs. My own response to this activity is informed by the model of media education developed in this thesis-within which participants take an active role in the construction of the meaning of media texts. Here, the role of facilitators is to take part in the negotiation of criteria, and also to make participants aware of the process of negotiation.

It seemed to me that the process established in the photograph activity could be repeated in the video workshop by involving participants in an exploration of relationships between the various sequences of video material. As a facilitator, I would deliberately organise the texts to create a particular pattern of meaning. Participants would then be invited to accept or challenge this pattern, and to apply their own criteria to the creation of new patterns by exploring the way in which these texts relate to each other. With this in mind, I negotiated with the other facilitators for the selection of a series of texts from mainstream television, each of which lends itself to the demonstration of a different aspect of the operation of the male gaze. These texts were then organized into a workshop format that made it possible to trace a systematic development in the operation of the male gaze.

The workshop thus begins with a set of Nashua advertisements. As I see it, the gender roles depicted here provide a vivid example of the way in which men are positioned as the *subject* of the male gaze, while women are offered the position of *object*. Within this advertisement it is also possible to see how categories of race can play a role within this positioning of men and women. After this, the documentary *As Large as Life* is shown. The focus here is on the implications of women's body-image for their attitude to food and eating. It seemed to me that this video could be said to deal with the implications which the male gaze hold for the way in which women look at their own bodies. For the second day I added gender violence to the pattern I was establishing, beginning with two sequences from

Hollywood films-*The Accused* and *Thelma and Louise*. Both these films can be said to deal with the role played by the male gaze within what I refer to in Chapter 3 as "rape culture". The sequences shown in the CAP workshop can, furthermore, be said to depict different versions of women's resistance to this culture. I have argued that, in the sequence from *The Accused*, the pleasure taken by Sarah, the main character, in her own role as sexual object becomes an appropriation of the position of subject of sexual pleasure. We saw, furthermore, that the film argues that within rape culture such an appropriation will be punished - in this case, by a gang-rape. Through its exploration of this issue, *The Accused* reaffirms a dualistic relationship between pleasure and danger which, I have argued, is highly debilitating to feminist interventions into rape culture. In the sequence from *Thelma and Louise*, female rebellion takes a different form: here, the women hit back by positioning themselves as the subjects of a different kind of pleasure-that of violence. Within this sequence, this appropriation remains unpunished. One could argue that, as such, this film rejects the opposition between pleasure and danger which informed *The Accused*, thus offering us a more "empowering" feminist position. Finally, the Steers advertisement represents a direct response to this film and its resistance to the male gaze, by forcing *Thelma and Louise* back into the status of sexual "burgers". In the context of the juxtaposition of texts within the video workshop, we now come full circle to the reinstatement of the roles established in the Nashua advertisement, in which women are firmly delegated to "bimbette-hood". Interestingly enough, we also see the reinstatement of the opposition between pleasure and danger which had informed *The Accused*. The equation between food and sexuality, in this advertisement, also allows one to link the discussion of the issues raised here to those dealt with on the previous day, in context of the discussion of eating disorders in *As Large as Life*.

During the course of my selection and organisation of these texts, a second pattern emerged, relating to the way in which each text is positioned within gender politics. Here it is particularly interesting to look at the degree to which these texts acknowledge their own position within gender politics. The Nashua advertisement presents itself as "a-political". (Viewed in terms of racial politics, a different picture emerges; here, the advertisement is making a deliberate political statement about a "feel-good" and, on the face of it, non racial

New South Africa). All three of the films position themselves, in contrast, as feminist. There are, however, important differences between their positioning. *As Large as Life* defines feminist media criticism as a critique of mainstream media. It seems also to make use of the opposition discussed, in Chapter 1, between the "bachelor machine" of mainstream media and the alternative culture of feminist media. As such, Hollywood films-and therefore *The Accused* and *Thelma and Louise*-are excluded from being "truly" feminist. Finally, the Steers advertisement is a deliberately anti-feminist response to *Thelma and Louise*. I have said, above, that the workshop comes full-circle to a reinstatement of the male gaze in this advertisement. We now see, however, that within this reinstatement there is an important difference; the reproduction of the male gaze can readily be recognised as a conscious, deliberate political act.

A third pattern was created by a difference in approach to video material within the design of the workshop. Here it must be explained that the section dealing with *As Large As Life* represented the one activity dealing with the discussion of media which I did not help to design. It seems to me that this section stands in direct opposition to my own approach to the role of media texts within media education. The facilitation of this activity reaffirmed the view expressed in the film itself - that as pure 'feminist' text, it stands in opposition to mainstream media. It was assumed, furthermore, that feminism was inherent to the film, which had a feminist "effect" on viewers. The emphasis was, therefore, not on the process of interaction between the viewers and the film. It is, I think, for this reason that the plan was to screen the whole film during this activity, with no interruptions or repetitions-a procedure which stands in direct opposition to the screening of short sequences in the rest of the workshop. The difference in approach can also be detected within the role played in this activity by a questionnaire dealing with body image and attitudes to eating. Participants would complete this questionnaire both before and after viewing the film-and then comment on the extent to which their responses to the questionnaire had changed. After the workshop, the facilitator would study the questionnaires and draw up a statistical representation of the changes in attitudes which they reveal. These changes would then be reported back to participants, who would again discuss them.

My own approach is critical of the differentiation made here between "feminist" and "non-feminist" texts-and the assumption that the former category of media is by definition an "alternative" to "mainstream" material. I have argued, in earlier chapters, that feminist resistance cannot escape gendered power relations, and remains by definition implicated in them. Media texts will always be informed by a range of discourses, offering different positions within the sphere of gender politics. The operation of these discourses depend, furthermore, on the choices made by viewers within the viewing process. The notion that the questionnaires could establish a "scientific" indication of the "effect" of the documentary on participants' attitudes also does not fit comfortably into the model of media education promoted in this thesis.

I would not, however, view the clash between this exercise and the rest of the workshop as a problem. It was expressive of different positions held by facilitators within both gender and media politics. As such, this difference served as an area in which facilitators could challenge each other in terms their approach to such politics. Furthermore, this inconsistency offered participants a variety of options in terms of their own approach to media and gender.

### **Realising the potential of the workshop design**

From the above, it should be clear that we had struck on a workshop design which holds exciting possibilities. Within the workshop format we developed one could, I think, put into practice a very dynamic approach to feminist media education. I would propose, however, that our chances of realising this potential to its fullest extent were limited, since the workshop was still influenced by the overall approach to media education taken within the CAP project. In order to illustrate this point, it is useful to revisit the discussion, described earlier, in which the steering committee developed guidelines for this workshop. This discussion demonstrates that facilitators had a high degree of insight into the problems faced by the CAP project, in developing a feminist media education programme. At the same time, one can detect the influence of the approach to media education which restricted facilitators' ability to resolve these problems. I will illustrate this point by evaluating the steering

committee's discussion of guidelines in the context of my own critique of the CAP project's approach to media education, as summarised in the introduction to this chapter.

The first comment, regarding the participants' denial that they are affected by the ideological operation of mass media, is, in my opinion, a valuable one. The facilitators are drawing attention, here, to a stance which plays a central role in reaffirming the illusion of "transparency" within such media. I would also support the suggestion made by facilitators that this denial of involvement should be challenged by means of media education. However, as noted above, it is important to take into account that this suggestion was made in the context of the particular approach to media education which informed the CAP project. *In order to make an informed judgement of the facilitators' suggestion, here, a more detailed discussion of this approach is therefore needed.*

We have seen, in the introduction to this chapter, that facilitators understood media education as a process through which we would be "illustrating" the oppression of women by mass media. It was assumed, in other words, that participants needed to be "made aware" of their own involvement in the ideological operation of advertisements, soap operas and other television genres. They are, supposedly, taught a form of "literacy"-the skill to "read" the way in which mass media constructs reality-which then enables them to refuse the oppressive ideological positions offered to them by such texts. Facilitators believed that manipulation by mass media forms part of the establishment of a "false consciousness". Through the appropriate educational process, one can then become "conscientised" and thus escape this manipulation. This, it seems to me, was exactly the assumption that led to the participants' belief in their own immunity to influence by media. *I would propose that this approach and the participants' denial of involvement are both based in the same fundamental understanding of the ideological operation of mass media.* It was for this reason that the approach to media education taken within the CAP course would not be able to challenge the participants' assumptions about media.

It is possible to discern, from the above, the way in which facilitators positioned themselves in relation to manipulation by mass media. The assumption seems to be that one's understanding of media texts springs from either "ignorance" or "literacy" and that media

educators would have to fall into the latter category in order to be well qualified for their work. In this way, we created an ideal for ourselves of all-knowing and disinterested educators. Because of this approach to media education, we were defining our own role as feminist media educators in a way that is similar to the participants' denial of involvement in the ideological operation of media. Here, then, we can clearly see that facilitators remained caught within the attitude to media that they were attempting to challenge.

It is useful to remember, at this point, my comments in section A, about the tradition of community education within which the CAP course was based. According to this tradition, facilitators are expected to play a neutral role within community education programmes. We saw that, within the CAP course, this criterion of neutrality leads to an inability to acknowledge the influence of facilitators' own political interests in media education. One could argue that the criterion of neutrality also informs the facilitators' adherence to the ideal of "literate" media educators who are all-knowing and disinterested. This criterion could, then, be part of the reason for facilitators' inability to escape the approach to media that they wished to challenge.

The second issue raised within the facilitators' meeting concerned the difficulties we experienced with the integration of skills training and media education. This issue is, I would argue, of direct relevance to my critique of the CAP project's approach to media education. The introduction to this chapter points to an inconsistency within the project's approach to social differences amongst the women involved. While skills training was defined in terms of such difference, it was seen as a cause for concern within media education. I proposed that this inconsistency could be traced to the criterion of neutral facilitation referred to above. It was within the sphere of media education that this criterion caused difficulties, since it was here that facilitators' own political interests played an important role. I would propose that the facilitators' difficulties with the integration of skills training and media education can be traced to this inconsistency. It could also explain what facilitators describe as a tendency within the course to veer away from media education altogether to focus exclusively on skills training.

Another way of illustrating the contradictions within our understanding of media

education is to examine our approach to the selection of video material for the workshop. We viewed this process as a search for good examples of the oppressive representation of women. In the discussion below, I will show that our understanding of what was meant, here, by a "good example", was informed by a contradictory approach to the relevance of participants' responses to the selected material.

One could argue that facilitators regarded the experiences brought by participants to the viewing process as an important consideration within the selection of workshop material. We prioritised, for example, the need to take into account participants' own estimation of the relevance of different media to their everyday lives. This belief finds expression in the third proposal made within the facilitators meeting, referred to above. Facilitators commented, here, that the participants expressed little interest in cinema, and that they mostly watched television. It was therefore suggested that our workshop should focus on the latter medium. The assumption, here, was that the relevance of a given media image to the process of media education is influenced by viewers' references to what one could call their "media environment"-that is, the media to which they are exposed in their everyday lives. Facilitators were therefore acting on the sound premise that a given media image is not in itself expressive of a "truth" about the ideological operation of media: rather, its meaning is determined by an interaction between viewers and texts.

This insight was overshadowed, however, by assumptions which stood in direct contradiction to it - and which have problematic implications for the process of media education. We assumed, for example, that the material chosen for the workshop should be the kind in which it was possible easily to "recognise" the oppressive representation of women in mass media. The search for workshop material is then guided by the ability of texts to "reveal" the way in which mass media "works". The assumption, here, is the one that I have criticised above: that feminist media education is a process through which the ideological operation of media is simply "illustrated" to participants. Here, the meaning of the text is understood as an essence, which exists independently of its reading by viewers.

In the introduction to this chapter, I suggested that the basic problem with this approach could be traced to our belief that our personal interests should not play a role within



the facilitation of the workshop. In this context it is interesting to note that this belief played a pivotal role within our selection of material for this workshop. By means of an examination of the degree to which we lived up to the criteria we set ourselves for the selection of workshop material, the discussion below illustrates the limitations which this belief in neutrality placed on the potential of the workshop.

The belief in the need for neutral facilitation is, I would say, implicit in the idea of "illustrative" texts referred to above. The assumption is, here, that media educators should only be objective facilitators: their personal interests should not, in other words, interfere with the process of education. We did not, in fact, measure up to this ideal. In practice, the selection of material *was* at least partly guided by personal preoccupations. An example of this can be seen in my own inclusion of a section dealing with *The Accused*. This section provided me with a way of making the workshop relevant to my research, since the film forms part of the object of study of this thesis. Another example can be found in the inclusion of the documentary *As Large as Life*. The video was the work of two of the facilitators involved in the workshop: they had just completed the film and were interested in screening it to a variety of audiences. Screening the documentary in the workshop clearly provided them with a high degree of access to the reactions of a well-defined group of viewers. Measured against our own criteria of disinterested education, one could therefore argue that the workshop was deeply flawed.

The definition of feminist media education I am proposing suggests, however, a very different evaluation of the workshop. Here it is assumed that the influence of the interests of facilitators on the selection of material is inevitable. The ideal of disinterested education is exchanged for a set of criteria with which to evaluate the *role* that such interests should play within feminist media education. Only with such open acknowledgement of personal interest can one address the full implications of various decisions made within the selection of material for the course. Within this model, the role that personal interests played in the inclusion of *As Large As Life* and *The Accused* would not be regarded as a problem in itself. Our inability to *face up* to the influence of our interests on these decisions would, however, be seen as a weakness since it meant that these decisions could not be exposed to a rigorous

process of evaluation.

One could argue that the influence of personal interest on the workshop should be evaluated according to the degree to which they interfere with the educational process. It is clear that the examples of personal interest referred to above clash with the set aims of the workshop: they have nothing to do with the process of feminist media education. It is important to realise, however, that the aims of media education *themselves* represent personal interests on the part of facilitators. Different facilitators may define these aims in very different ways and these may clash, again, with the expectations of participants. I would not, therefore, argue that personal interests are a "necessary evil", and that they must be tolerated as long as they do not conflict with the "educational needs" of participants. *Such conflict of interest defines feminist media education.*

The framework I am proposing here would also emphasise the importance of taking into account the influence of the personal interests of participants on their response to workshop material. At the beginning of this section, I referred to the fact that CAP facilitators used a selection criterion which I believe to be of value: the degree to which participants would regard the medium as relevant to their concerns. This criterion would have been prioritised if the CAP course had been based in the framework I am referring to here. Instead, our approach to media education counteracted the value of this criterion.

I have argued, above, that facilitators created patterns of meaning by juxtaposing different kinds of video material with each other. It seems to me that the development of these patterns depends on a process of negotiation between different points of view. Such negotiation takes place on three levels: between the texts themselves, between texts and viewers, and between different points of view existing amongst viewers.

The next chapter, which look at the running of the workshop, illustrates the operation of these levels of negotiation within the CAP workshop.

## THE CAP VIDEO WORKSHOP:

### Day One

*If we are shy, who will stand up and say what needs to be said? With that in mind we are prepared to prolong our own agony.*

[From: minutes from the 1993 CAP women's media education course]

In Chapter 5, I explained that the CAP video workshop offers a way of drawing together the three main lines of discussion developed in this thesis: that of film analysis, resistance to violence against women and media education. Chapter 5 traced the connections between these discussions in context of an evaluation of the guidelines developed for the design of the workshop. The following chapter continues the process of drawing together these discussions through an examination of the dynamics which developed during the workshop's facilitation. In order to grasp the full significance of this examination, it is important to be familiar with the arguments, presented in this thesis, around the three lines of discussion. Familiarity with the first two chapters is of particular importance, since it is here that I establish the theoretical framework on which the thesis as a whole is based. As part of the introduction to the present chapter, I therefore offer a brief review of the theoretical framework developed in this thesis, with an emphasis on Chapters 1 and 2.

Part 1 of this thesis examines the strengths and limitations of feminist film theory in terms of its potential for making a powerful intervention into the politics of media. I emphasise the ability of film analysis based on such theory to open up the possibility of a critical evaluation of the ideological frameworks which informs the construction of cinematic realism. Within this discussion, I focus on the value of analysing the operation of categories of gendered identity which operate within the construction of such realism. I pay particular attention to the implication of such analysis for a critique of dominant representations of violence against women.

Throughout this examination, I focus on the way in which feminist analyses of visual media understand the relation between "woman as spectacle, as object of the look" and "women as historical subjects". Chapter 1 argues that the strength of a feminist perspective

on film lies in its focus on the instability of this relation. The "uncomfortable fit" between women and the cinema screen opens up the possibility of making an intervention into the continuous reformulation that takes place, within this relation, of the subject positions offered to women by cinema. I look, in this chapter, at the theorisation of the "male gaze"-and, within this, of "spectatorial pleasure"-as an important example of the attempt, within psychoanalytic feminist film theory, to deal with this volatile relationship between images of women and women as viewers. Chapter 1 proposes that this relationship offers the possibility of a feminist point of resistance to the ideological operation of mainstream cinema. I suggest that feminist film theory, tends, however, to view this instability as a *threat* to the establishment of a coherent feminist position of resistance to the ideological operation of mainstream cinema. This response can for example be seen in the call, within psychoanalytic film theory, for a refusal of spectatorial pleasure. Here, women's enjoyment of the illusionism of cinema is seen as "false" because it is defined by power relations which are exploitative to women. I argue that such film theory approaches gendered identity in terms of a biologically deterministic dualism between agency and structure. I suggest that the differentiation between sociological and psychoanalytic film theory is in itself dependent on this dualism. The first tradition evaluates the authenticity of cinematic representations of women in terms of a comparison with "real" women without taking social construction into account. Within the second, women as viewers *become* cinematic constructions, and thus have very little hope of making an intervention into the gender relations reproduced in mainstream cinema. Chapter 1 goes on to propose that, in order to draw on the subversive potential of the relation between viewers and the cinema screen, it would be important for feminist film analysis to transcend this dualism between agency and structure. I suggest that this could be done by acknowledging that cinematic illusionism is dependent on a *voluntary* "suspension of disbelief" by spectators. This means that the illusionism of such film is not a manipulation of passive viewers, but that viewers play an active role in its construction. The relationship between women as viewers and women as cinematic images becomes, here, a dynamic interplay between agency and structure.

Chapter 2 proposes that the axioms of feminist film theory could not simply be

adjusted in order to include such an approach to the cinematic illusionism. The inability, within such theory, to transcend the dualistic approach to agency and structure is informed by concerns which could only be understood once one looks at the position of such theory within the general context of contemporary feminist movements. I look at this wider context in order to clarify what is at stake for feminist film theory in the theorisation of cinematic illusionism-and spectatorial pleasure in particular. I focus, here, on feminist sexuality debates, and we see that similar patterns emerge to those described in the context of film theory. We also see a realisation within feminist debates that women's expression of their own sexual identity necessarily remains caught within exploitative power relations. This realisation is accompanied by a growing consciousness that, for women, the affirmation of their position as the subjects of sexual desire holds very real dangers of physical violence. As with film theory, then, the realisation that pleasure necessarily exists within exploitative relations of power is viewed by feminists as cause for concern. One particularly widespread response to this realisation has been the "separatism" of cultural feminism, which was accompanied by a relinquishment of women's claim to sexual agency. This, again, is similar to the call, described in Chapter 2, for a feminist "counter cinema" based on the rejection of spectatorial pleasure. I propose that this response is rooted in a reluctance, within feminist movements, to acknowledge the differences which exist between women - such as those of sexual orientation. The smoothing over of these differences inevitably lead to a simplistic approach to power relations, in which agency and structure are seen as opposites. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implication of these arguments for the feminist critique of dominant representations in visual media of violence against women. I suggest, here, that within such critique the essentialist dualism of agency versus structure becomes the relation between the veneration and violation of women in visual media. I propose that this dualism could be dissolved if one accepts that pleasure and power are not opposites, and the expression of sexuality is not a liberation from power relations: it is, rather, defined by power relations. The illusionism of classical realist cinema becomes, here, a sphere in which a viewer may explore the relations of power within which his or her identity is reproduced.

Part 2 focuses on the possibility of developing an approach to feminist media analysis

which draws on the strengths of feminist traditions in film theory while at the same time overcoming their weaknesses. I argue that such analysis would need to understand cinematic meaning in terms of a negotiation between the formal aspects of the cinematic text and historically positioned spectators. I propose, in Part 2, that media education offers a space in which an examination of this relation becomes possible, and in which such a culture of feminist film analysis can therefore be developed. The advantage of such education lies in the fact that it revolves around the discussion of media texts by groups of people. In my discussion of the video workshop, I will demonstrate the advantages of such a focus for feminist media analysis.

The examination of the video workshop, in this chapter, could be said to perform a role similar to that of my analysis of *The Accused* in Chapter 3. This analysis took place in context of my proposal, in Chapter 2, that concerns about violence against women form an important backdrop against which to understand the smoothing over of differences between women within feminist debates.<sup>9</sup> The essentialist approach to gender, within feminist film theory, could therefore usually be addressed in the context of a film dealing with violence against women. We saw that the approach to sexual violence in *The Accused* is informed by political concerns similar to those of the feminist debates discussed in Chapter 2. We saw, furthermore, that these concerns are easily incorporated into the language of classical realism within which the film is based. I pointed out that, since the film theory discussed in Chapter 1 views this cinematic language as innately conservative, an analysis of *The Accused* based on such theory would necessarily view this incorporation as cause for concern. In my analysis of *The Accused*, I evaluate the ability of such film theory to provide a critique of this incorporation, making visible the contradictions in the political frameworks which informs the film's representation of sexual violence. I conclude, here, that this potential remains limited as long as the film's analysis is informed by an essentialist understanding of gendered identity. When, however, such analysis acknowledges the subversive potential of the instability of women's relation to the cinema screen, it can make a powerful intervention into the ideological operation of *classical realist cinematic language*.

It is in this context that the present chapter deals with the reaction of the CAP women

to a series of media texts-which includes a sequence from *The Accused*. The women's discussion of these texts took place in the context of an exploration of the role played by mass media in either challenging or reproducing social relations which give rise to violence against women. We will see that their approach to the issue of violence against women is similar to that of the feminist debates discussed in Chapter 2. In my evaluation of the workshop, I investigate the degree to which these women were able to develop a feminist framework of media analysis which has the power to make visible the ideological operation of the media texts presented in this workshop. I point out, here, the extent to which the women draw on the principles in which the film theory presented in Chapter 1 is based. In this way, I am able to examine the potential of media education for developing a feminist approach to media analysis which draws on the potential of this film theory but, at the same time, manages to transcend its limitations. I show that, within this group context, it is possible to debate the political implications of a variety of responses, by different viewers, to such a text. I argue that, in the context of such a debate, one can begin to recognise that women take up various and historically specific positions within spectatorial relations. A recognition of these differences can lead to an affirmation of the active role played by viewers in the construction of the meaning of films. I argue that, in the context of such analysis one could also establish a feminist approach to issues such as sexuality and violence which escapes the limitations of the debates discussed in Chapter 2.

My study of the video workshop also brought areas of theory to my attention which I have not as yet considered in relation to feminist media education. I refer, for example, to the role played by the representation of families in establishing the subject positions offered to women by mass media, and the importance of jokes in structuring spectatorial pleasure. Since these areas were highlighted by the discussion of texts from South African television by a group of South African women, their inclusion in the theoretical framework which informs this model could arguably help to ensure its relevance to a local context. However, since this chapter is intended primarily as a demonstration of the practical implications of the theoretical framework put forward in earlier chapters, I will not include a detailed discussion of these areas of theory here. Instead, I will simply discuss their general relevance to the workshop,

and point out theoretical texts which one could refer to in further explorations of their value for feminist media education.

Detailed familiarity with the workshop material and our reasons for their selection are important for an insightful reading of this chapter. I would therefore ideally have preferred to include this information in the chapter. However, since some of the material (i.e. the advertisements and sections from *Thelma and Louise*) also forms an important point of reference in Chapter 4, it seems economical to provide the information as a single reference for both chapters. I have chosen to do so in the form of an appendix. The analyses of video material which I do include in this chapter are specifically a response to group discussions which took place during the workshop. The analyses of video material found in the appendix represent, in contrast, an explanation of the initial motivations for including these texts within given workshops.

In examining the way in which power relations between the participants were accommodated by the workshop facilitation, I will pay particular attention to two categories of social difference. I look, firstly, at the role played by gendered identity in causing divisions between the women on the course. Chapter 5 referred to our accommodation of social differences defined by gender in the context of the workshop activity focusing on the selection of photographs of "strong women". We saw that the facilitators' evaluation disregarded the fact that the participants had, to different degrees, invested in the idea that women bear a responsibility for the well-being of families - and especially for the well-being of children. I argued that, in accepting such responsibility, women can gain a certain amount of power within social relations. I suggested that the way in which the women on the CAP course positioned themselves in relation to this notion of "familial" responsibility informed the relations of power which existed amongst them. In the present chapter, I will continue my exploration of this issue. As in Chapter 5, I will argue that the facilitators' approach to the hierarchy reveals an inability to accommodate the fact that the women hold very different positions within gendered power relations. I will argue, furthermore, that this inability was fundamentally linked to the essentialist concept of gender in which the framework of analysis of the project was based.



The second category of difference on which I will focus is that of race. Here, I will look at tensions which existed amongst participants and within the relationship between facilitators and participants. Before discussing the video workshop in the context of racial difference, I offer some comments on the role played by the facilitators in dealing with such differences within the CAP course as a whole. The operation of these categories provide a striking example of the practical consequences, within the running of the course, of the inconsistent approach to social difference. On the one hand, acknowledgement of racial difference played a constructive role within the project. As the course progressed, participants established a sense of themselves as a tightly-knit group of "black" women in *opposition* to the "white" trainers. This had positive consequences, since participants saw themselves as responsible for making the course a valuable educational experience: facilitators were tolerated, in a friendly but firm manner, as necessary "curators". On the other hand, there existed important racial differences *amongst* participants-as well as differences in education, class, age et. In contrast to the clear demarcation between "white" facilitators and "black" participants, these differences were not seriously addressed. I would say that the deciding factor within our ability to address social difference was the presence, or otherwise, of conflicts of interest. It was, I think, in areas that such conflict did not play a major role that the racial distinction referred to above became possible. Our belief in the need for completely disinterested facilitation was built into this distinction: facilitators were, as we saw, allotted the role of neutral "curators". In contrast, the differences of race, class etc. between participants did unquestionably represent conflicts of interest-and, as such, could not be acknowledged.

In this chapter I will further illustrate the pertinence of these comments to a critique of the CAP course's model of media education. We will see that, as with the facilitators' meetings examined in Chapter 5, one of the most striking examples of disregard of social difference is found within a discussion dealing with the exclusion of men from the course. It will become clear that if, in future, the project incorporates the approach to media education I am arguing for, this exclusion could operate as a space in which women can make an intervention into exploitative gender relations. I will show, however, that this will only be

possible if the project develops an approach to feminism which accepts the possibility of conflicts of interest between women. The project should prioritise a critical engagement, by women, with their own involvement in various forms of oppression-*including that of gender*.

We will see that there is potential for such an emphasis in the activities and video material which makes up this workshop. This potential must, however, remain unrealised within the context of the model of media education currently informing the CAP course.

All five parts of the workshop will be discussed below. Each part is introduced with a brief description of the workshop activity, followed by an exploration of the group discussions which it sparked off.

## **1: Speaking out**

### **The workshop activity**

On the morning of the first day of the workshop, a video camera was set up in the CAP community hall where we were working. The group broke into pairs who were asked to imagine their partner as someone whose attitude to violence against women they would like to challenge; someone, moreover, whom they would usually find intimidating to talk to. In their first language, the pairs then practised telling each other their personal feelings about violence against women. This process culminated in an exercise in which each woman stepped in front of the camera to have her statements videoed. Afterwards, the group came together to discuss their responses to this activity.

### **The group discussion**

Judging from the discussion which followed this activity, participants viewed it as a valuable way of exploring the difficulties they experience with "speaking out". They seemed to see the role-play as the creation of a space apart from the world of their everyday existence. Within this space, they felt capable of exploring power relations which existed in that everyday

world. It would appear, from their comments, that they saw the relationship between these two spheres as that of an "imaginary" versus a "real" world. This distinction between the real and the imaginary is at its most explicit in their evaluation of the impact of the workshop on their lives as a whole. One woman stated, for example, that "... in the real world [I] will still be intimidated by those people". This statement indicates that the feeling of liberation she experienced within the workshop could not (as yet) be carried over into her everyday life. For her, the theatrical nature of the role-play stood in opposition to "real" life. The use of the role-play within the woman-only environment of the workshop nevertheless had something to offer her: it enabled her to explore her responses to power relations within which her daily life takes place<sup>40</sup>.

As I see it, the assumption behind this exercise was that, in their everyday lives, these women experience certain restrictions on their ability to express themselves-and that these restrictions could be lifted by the absence of men. It is understood, at the same time, that escape from these restrictions *would not be ensured simply by this absence but needed further facilitation*. The workshop's proposed solution to this problem is a valuable one: the "acting out" of challenges to these restrictions. This would indicate an awareness that it is not just the presence or absence of men which informs the women's feelings of inhibition. In the role-play they seem to be confronting, rather, their own sense of identity (here one may include the extent to which this identity is defined by their relation to men) and the way in which this identity inhibits their ability to speak out *even within a woman-only environment*. This is clearly not an example of what I refer to in this thesis as an essentialist approach to gendered identity. On the contrary, this workshop deals successfully with the way in which women accept or challenge positions which they are offered within dominant discourses about gender.

I have argued, in this thesis, that if feminist media education is to make a valuable intervention into the politics of media, it would have to challenge essentialist concepts of gendered identity. It seems to me that a workshop activity such as the one described here

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<sup>40</sup> The volume of material from the CAP course, referred to in the previous chapter, includes the minutes taken at the video workshop. I have chosen not to reference my quotes from these minutes since, in my description of the women's discussions, I indicate clearly which parts of the workshop particular comments were made.

could therefore play a valuable role within a feminist media education project. To some extent, the activity was successful in its utilisation of this potential. At the same time, as I have pointed out, the CAP course as a whole is based in an approach to media education which needs to be transformed before one can run this workshop in a way that can do full justice to its potential. We saw that the course's approach to media education was based in an essentialist concept of gendered identity which led to an inability to acknowledge differences between women. I will illustrate the influence of this approach, within the video workshop, by looking closely at the group discussion which followed the role-play.

It was noticeable that, in directing their challenges during the role-play, participants did not indicate the gender of their "imaginary" adversaries. One SADTU member, for example, aimed her comments at the body of teachers who deny that the sexual harassment of women is taking place in schools<sup>41</sup>. A representative from Rape Crisis invited "all you intellectuals" to "stop talking" and to join her in doing something practical about violence against women. In both cases, one can assume that the interlocutors were not restricted to one gender - but this was not made explicit. This pattern was probably established by the way in which the facilitation of this exercise had been framed. In directing the exercise, no mention had been made of the gender of the people who were seen to inhibit the women's ability to "speak out". I would suggest that this absence of references to gender is expressive of a fluidity or open-ness in the operation of categories of gender within this activity. Within the group discussion which followed, categories of gender played a very different role. This discussion functioned, in fact, as a way of pinning down, or even closing off, the fluidity of gender categories within the role-play. It is valuable to look closely at this discussion in order to gain some understanding of this process of closure.

From the group discussion it became clear that participants had included both men and women amongst the people to whom they were directing their comments. However, their descriptions of their challenges to women focused exclusively on the issue of age difference. One participant spoke, for example, about the fact that she worked mostly with women older

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<sup>41</sup> The South African Democratic Teachers' Union. The workshop took place during a teachers' strike, and SADTU members on the course were in a volatile mood because of this.

than herself - and that she often needs to "tell them what to do"-something she finds intimidating. These references to age difference pointed to an important dynamic within the course, since the women varied greatly in age. We did not, however, spend any time exploring the significance of these references. The potential value of such an exploration can be glimpsed within one participant's comment, who agreed with the woman quoted above that it is hard to work with older women when you are in a position of authority over them. She referred, in explanation, to the difficulties she experiences in counselling women older than herself: "They say you are young, you have no children, you're not married, what do *you* know." The suggestion, here, seemed to be that older women claim greater experience in the responsibilities of being wives and mothers, and that they feel that their views carry greater authority because of this. This woman's clients seemed to understand age difference in terms of values surrounding women's responsibility for the well-being of families. I have argued, earlier, that such values influenced the power hierarchy which operated within the participants' group in the CAP course. Clearly, an exploration of the issue of age difference, within this group, would have offered a valuable perspective on these relations of power.

No mention was made of other important differences between women which were represented within the group, such as those of race, class and education. It was also noticeable that the comments which were made about differences between women were, on the whole, quite rare. The discussion shifted, in fact, to an almost exclusive focus on the restrictive role played by men on women's ability to speak out-and the liberation which the participants experienced due to the absence of men from the CAP course. Participants felt that it was this aspect of the course which created a space that enabled them to by-pass restrictions on their ability to voice their views. One participant's response to the role-play was, for example, to say that within the women-only context of the CAP course, she had found the confidence to air her views-and that this confidence had enabled her publicly to challenge men's attitudes towards women in her organisation. "I find it difficult to speak out amongst men," she explained,

... Even though I have the mandate from the people to sit in a committee, then the men say, "oh, it's the same woman, what is she going to tell us". I'm

from the squatter camp and I'm used to these meetings ... but if I don't agree I just stand up and say.

For this woman, the feeling of liberation established within the drama exercise was directly linked to the woman-only environment of the course, one which she could carry over into her organisational interaction with men. Comments made by the other women indicated that they also made a connection between the role-play and the "space" to "speak out" which had been established in the course-and they linked this directly to the absence of men.

It seemed to me, in fact, that the restrictions which women place on each other was not considered to be of any real importance, even though hierarchies defined by gendered identity clearly did exist amongst the participants. I have already proposed that there existed at least one such hierarchy within the group, based on values surrounding the responsibility women are supposed to bear towards the well-being of "the family". In my description of the group's response to the Nashua advertisement, below, we will see further references to such values. It is therefore disturbing that the participants' comments about the "imagined" adversaries within this exercise slipped so easily into an exclusive discussion of the woman-only nature of the course and the way it liberated them from the oppressive presence of men. This shift drew attention away from the fact that their adversaries had in fact *not* all been men. The activity, which began with a fluid and open approach to gender, thus switched unnoticed to rigid categorisations of gender. Put simply, by finally conflating "people who inhibit women's ability to express themselves" with "men", the workshop obscures the oppressive role that *women* themselves can play in inhibiting other women's ability to "speak out". It is, I think, important to note that we failed to acknowledge, in our facilitation of this discussion, this shift to a focus on *one specific* set of social dynamics. The failure to acknowledge this shift is an example of the way in which the course's approach to gendered identity obscured conflicts of interest between women. Despite the potential of this exercise, the power dynamics *within* the CAP group therefore remained unproblematised.

The shifts which took place within this discussion can, I think, be better understood when one realises that the options offered to participants by this role-play were not as "gender neutral" as they may seem. In order to appreciate this point, it is necessary to look at the workshop activity in relation to the feminist framework of the CAP project as a whole.

Within this context, the role-play becomes specifically geared towards addressing the restrictions which the presence of men can place on women's ability to speak out. Since this framework was basic to the design of the course as a whole, it necessarily influenced participants' responses-both within the video workshop and other parts of the course. It seems to me, then, that the realisation of the potential of the "speaking out" exercise would depend on a transformation of the overall framework within which the CAP course was based.

We have seen, above, that the "speaking out" exercise provides a valuable way of exploring issues around gendered identity and the difficulties women experience with expressing their own views. We saw that the exercise successfully relates this exploration to the issue of violence against women. I would argue that the design of this workshop activity also allows for a way of relating these issues to the discussions of television and mass media within the rest of the workshop. This becomes clear when one looks at the role played by the video camera in this exercise.

I pointed out in my discussion of the guidelines we developed for this workshop, that we intended a very different role for the camera from the one it conventionally plays in the recording of workshop activities. We were, above all, concerned that participants should themselves play an active role in the production of the video material. In retrospect, I would say that the camera in fact ended up playing a highly ambiguous role within the power relations which operated in this exercise. The women did not, in the end, operate the camera themselves: they simply stepped in front of it to be videoed. As such, their role in the production of the video material was still a passive one. We will see, from their comments, that this had a marked effect on their response to the camera: they experienced its presence as intimidating. At the same time, the static position of the camera clearly gave the women the power to appropriate the space in front of it. Lines were marked out in masking tape on the floor: this demarcated the range of the camera. The women were therefore able consciously to choose to be on camera by stepping into this space, rather than being filmed with little choice in the matter. Furthermore, during the course of the CAP project, the women had produced a strikingly beautiful cloth, embroidered in vivid colours with feminist slogans and

pictures: this was hung as a backdrop to the space in front of the camera. In this way, the space was demarcated as their own.

I would propose that the value of our use of the camera was not, in the end, only the one we intended-i.e. to offer participants some control over the production of the video. It was also useful that the camera became a focal point of the exercise. This meant that the participants could deliberately and openly explore the conditions created by its presence and the way in which these influenced their experience of the "speaking out" exercise. They were able, in fact, to relate the difficulties of "speaking out" to the intimidating experience of deliberately taking up position in front of a camera and speaking into its lens. Their exploration of this connection can be seen within comments which were made in the group discussion. "The reason why we became nervous", one woman declared, indicating the camera, "... is because you don't know this and how to do it." She relates this response directly to her experience of being restricted in her ability to speak out by people who intimidate her, explaining that, "... you have the feeling that you are still in front of the same people who discourage you and shout you down." Here, we see a relation drawn between the women's exclusion from public forums and the intimidating nature of the camera.

It seems to me that we could have placed greater emphasis on this response to the camera in our facilitation of the group discussion. By exploring the women's feeling of nervousness about being videoed, one could draw out the way in which the institutions of mass media form part of an experience of exclusion which is immediately recognisable and significant to women: the inability to speak out in public. I think our failure to draw on this potential can be linked to our belief that the course should "liberate" participants from power relations. We therefore emphasised the need to offer participants control over the production of video material, rather than focusing on the fact that such control was necessarily ambiguous.

I would say that there is a similarity between the facilitators' response to the ambiguous role of the camera, here, and their approach, described earlier, to the openness of categories of gender within the speaking out exercise. In both cases, we were given the opportunity to explore the complexity of the relationship between structure and agency. We



could, for example, have looked at the way in which the freedom of "speaking out" and the use of a camera is always defined by power relations. We opted, instead, for a more simplistic understanding in which we attempted to "liberate" the women from power relations-through the separatism of a women-only group, and by "ensuring" that the women "control" the camera.

It is, I think, possible to compare the value of the element of the imaginary within the "speaking out" exercise to that of the "suspension of disbelief" within Hollywood film, which I have discussed in Chapter 1. There is a logical connection between the principles at work within the role-play described here and those which, I have argued, operate within spectatorial pleasure. In both cases, fantasy allows one to explore one's positioning within power relations in a way that would otherwise be impossible. This exploration becomes possible because, within the context of fantasy, gendered identity becomes much more fluid. In this context, it is particularly interesting to note the way in which the group discussion, above, "closes off" the fluidity of meaning within the role-play. This closure is, I think, similar to the feminist analysis of media described in Chapter 1, in which spectatorial pleasure is described as a "bachelor machine" which operates according to a rigid system of gendered identification. I would therefore propose that this description of cinema, and the discussion of the role-play referred to above, are informed by very similar feminist frameworks of social analysis. In my discussion of the rest of the workshop, I will demonstrate the influence of this framework on the women's ability to develop an incisive critical approach to mass media.

## **2: the Nashua advertisements<sup>42</sup>**

### **The presentation of workshop material**

This activity began with a screening of the first version of the Nashua advertisement. I asked participants to evaluate this text both in terms of its potential success in advertising the photocopier and in terms of its ideological operation. During the course of this discussion, I

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<sup>42</sup> See Appendix A for detailed description of this material.

screened the second version, and we compared it to the first. The content of this discussion was very much guided by the issues on which the group chose to focus.

### **The group discussion**

The immediate response from the participants to the first version of the advertisement was that the use of children "... attracts the audience" because children are "cute". The fact, furthermore, that a child can use the photocopier illustrates its simplicity. It was then suggested that the boy "... stands for men", and that, although the advertisement uses children, it was "... saying something about grown-up behaviour". We should, in fact, "... see adult thoughts in the kids' actions". This response started a heated debate around the fact that the main character was a boy rather than a girl. One woman suggested that, since the use of children was a comment on adult behaviour, the advertisement was saying that "a man with a lot of women is cool". The reason why a little girl could not play this central role in the advertisement was that a "woman with a lot of men" is imply regarded as "promiscuous". The advertisement is saying, furthermore, that "women are loved" while "men do the loving". Another woman explained that the boy is presented by the advertisement as "the one who can love on his own". As I understand it, the suggestion, here, was that men's sexual identity is defined in terms of their own choices, while women's sexual identity is defined in relation to men's desire.

One of the women reacted to these comments with great irritation. Why *not*, she retorted, have a little boy as the main character? It was ridiculous to read all these messages into the advertisement, which was, after all, just a very natural, heart-warming story about a little boy giving a "love message" to little girls. Some of the other women in the group agreed with this argument. It was repeatedly stated, in support of this point of view, that the boy might after all have been "the best person" auditioned for the part.

In order to understand what was at stake for these women within this discussion, it is useful to look at the role played here by the concept of private space. This concept can, I think, be observed within two areas with which the group discussion concerned itself. The concept of private space plays a role, first of all, in the group's response to the *form* of the

Nashua advertisement. Here it is important to note that the advertisement offers itself as a narrative and, by doing so, positions itself as entertainment. The participants' resistance to the analysis of the advertisement can be read, I think, as a rejection of the relevance of a political analysis of entertainment. Entertainment is viewed, here, as one of the last resorts from the restrictions of "public" life - a space in which one can still be "free". In Chapter 4, I explored the role played by the understanding of entertainment within conservative approaches to media education. A brief review of the points I made within this examination helps to throw some light on the present discussion.

I looked, in Chapter 4, at the response of a group of school students to the analysis of the Nashua advertisement - a response which has much in common with the irritated reaction of the CAP participants, described above. I interpreted the students' resistance to the analysis of this advertisement as a defensive reaction to the idea that entertainment is not innocent of exploitative power relations - that it is, in fact, as encoded with restrictions as any other part of one's experience. I proposed that this defence springs from the belief that the acceptance of these restrictions would mean the loss of a last resort of innocent pleasure. These students had invested in a conservative approach to media based in a dualistic opposition between viewing as political resistance and viewing as pleasure. It was because of this dualism that they were unenthusiastic about discussions of the semiotic construction of mass media. One could say that this defence of the innocence of entertainment is similar to the feminist refusal of spectatorial pleasure described in Chapter 1. Both are responses to the notion that pleasure is necessarily defined by power relations - and both refuse to analyse the existence of such power relations within the sphere of pleasure. The CAP women's rejection of media analysis can, I think, be understood in similar terms. Their scorn of the serious analysis of gender roles can be interpreted as a protection of what they regard as their private space. They have, in other words, invested in the same conservative understanding of media as the students referred to above. These women assumed that the pleasure of watching the advertisement would be lost through the process of analysis. I think they were correct in this assumption, but not because analysis *necessarily* destroys entertainment. It is, rather, that, *in the case of the Nashua advertisement*, feminist analysis necessarily leads to the rejection of a political

position in which these participants had made an important investment. In order to appropriate viewing pleasure as a site of resistance for media education, facilitators would have to make an intervention into this process of investment.

The participants' irritation with the serious analysis of the Nashua advertisement may also be related to the fact that the narrative of the advertisement is structured in the form of a joke. We see a little boy handing out a stack of valentines enscribed with the words "I Love Only You", while on the soundtrack we also hear the words of the song "Only You". The ironic contrast between the boy's actions and these words is intended to be funny. The advertisement could even be said to be a laughing comment on the supposed inconsistency of men. One would have to decide whether this joke affirms or challenges the conventional gender roles on which it is commenting. I would suggest that it offers a release of tension which ensures that anxieties which build up around these roles remain containable. Since it does explore these anxieties, such a joke nevertheless holds subversive potential which could be utilised within a workshop such as this. It seems to me that the women who objected to the analysis of this advertisement were resistant to an exploration of this potential. I have said that the participants rejected the political analysis of entertainment because they regarded it as "private" - a last pleasurable resort from the restrictions of public life. I would now add that, for these women, humour may have represented an important aspect of this private sphere. It seems to me that it would be valuable, in the context of this workshop, to explore the role played by jokes - and humour in general - in the acknowledgement of social conflict.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, as will become clear below, jokes played an important role throughout the video workshop in the struggles that took place around the participants' acceptance of the political relevance of feminist media analysis.

The concept of private space also plays a role in the group's response to the behaviour of the characters in this advertisement. Here, the women who rejected the analysis of the advertisement could be said to reject the relevance of applying political analysis to the

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<sup>43</sup> Here, Freud's discussion of jokes in his essay *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* would be of particular relevance. Freud argues that jokes offer a shorthand resolution of problems that, in real life, would require painful and protracted resolution. They operate, he suggests, as safety-valves, and as such allows one to avoid the actual resolution of these problems. It seems to me that Freud's argument could offer a valuable perspective on the role played by jokes in the resistance, by the CAP participants, to the serious analysis of social conflict.

behaviour of children. Their refusal to accept that the story played out in this advertisement was anything more than an innocently charming joke indicates, I think, a resistance to criticising the values on which this story was based. It is possible to detect, within the depiction of children in this advertisement, references to a particular understanding of the nature of families - and the position of children within families. Within such an understanding, one of the most important roles of families is to create a private space which ensures that children can be protected from the world "outside". In this way, they are supposed to be protected from experiences which, it is believed, would endanger their "innocence" - such as that of sexuality and violence. This understanding of families denies that violence is a "normal" aspect of this "private" space. It assumes, furthermore, that the sexual relations which form part of the world of the family is innocent of exploitative power relations. Here, the gender roles which "innocent" children play out amongst themselves must necessarily be regarded as being free of influence from such relations of power. It is the playing out of such innocence that is represented in the Nashua advertisement. Note, here, that according to the view of families to which I am referring it is women who are given the responsibility of ensuring a safe and nurturing space for children. The values of motherhood which, I argued earlier informed the CAP workshop, can also be detected within this discussion. I think that it is in defence of this view of children, families and motherhood that the CAP participants resisted the analysis of gender roles in the advertisement. For these women to accept the analysis of gender roles, within this advertisement, would mean to give up their own investment in the idea that families create a private space which falls outside exploitative power relations. They did not see the personal benefit of doing so, and would remain unconvinced until offered a genuine alternative; one, in other words, which offers them at least an equivalent degree of power<sup>44</sup>.

A very different dynamic developed when participants became aware of the role played by

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<sup>44</sup> In *The Anti-Social Family*, Barrett and McIntosh offer a fascinating discussion of the ideological framework which defines references to families within contemporary political debate. Their critique of this framework offers, I believe, a very important point of reference for analysis of media representations of issues relating to families.

this advertisement within the politics of race. Someone pointed out that it was only the white girls in this advertisement who received valentines. Participants immediately agreed that, in light of this omission, the advertisement's celebration of non-racialism was hypocritical. At this point, I explained that, when the advertisement had first appeared on South African television, so many people had objected to the exclusion of the black schoolgirls that the advertising company had to produce a second version. We then watched this second version of the advertisement, and compared the two. There seemed to be a general agreement that the second version was not an improvement on the first; now there was only one little black girl, and she seemed almost unnoticeable in the crowd of white children. It was pointed out, furthermore, that gender roles in the advertisement remained the same. Participants now began to build up a generalised picture of the ideological operations of the advertisements - both in terms of race and gender. At this point, the irritation with the political analysis of gender roles seemed forgotten; there was general consensus that the advertisement was not just selling a photocopies but "... also racism and sexism". One woman explained: "They are selling to men who want to buy the machine the idea that they can be big, strong men who can have all the women". Another commented that the advertisement was saying that, when you buy the photocopier, "... you can have ten women". Someone then pointed out that the ideas sold by this advertisement are made respectable by shifting the responsibility onto children: "... the issue of racism could not have been accomplished with adults".

From the above, it should be clear that, while some of the women were not easily convinced of the relevance of applying gender analysis to this advert, there was immediate consensus about the importance of criticising the advertisement's attitudes to race. The reason for this was, I think, that all of these women came from organisations which were deeply grounded in a culture of resistance to racism but which did not prioritise a critique of gender relations. The participants may, also, have been finally convinced of the importance of analysing the operation of racial categories within this advertisement when they were informed of the critical response which the advertisement had sparked off when it was broadcast, and the fact that this led to the production of a second version of the advertisement. It is less easy to explain why it was at this point, when the women became aware of the racist

implications of the advertisement, that they were also able to resolve the dispute about the relevance of applying an analysis of *gender* to the text. An explanation could be found in the role played by the comparison between the two advertisements. The juxtaposition of these texts may have drawn attention to the fact that they were not "windows on reality" but constructions of reality - and that other versions of such construction are possible. In becoming more sensitive to the constructed nature of the text, the women may have found themselves accepting that allocation of gender roles within the story were not simply "natural".

The above provides convincing reasons for the women's relinquishment of the "private space" of entertainment. It still remains to be explained, however, why it was at this point that they also gave up their defence of the "private space" of families. It seems to me that the exclusion of black schoolgirls in this advertisement played a crucial role in this second concession. I would argue that if the advertisement had not included this element of racism, many of the participants would have remained unconvinced of the importance of a critique of the gender roles in the text. This would be true even if there had been a public outcry over the gender roles in the advertisement and a new version had to be produced, featuring a little girl handing out valentines (to both boys and girls?). It may even have remained true if one were still able to challenge the illusionism of the advertisement by juxtaposing different versions of the text. The women's acceptance of the importance of gender analysis becomes understandable only when *it does not represent a moment of revelation*, in which the scales fall from the participants' eyes. It is, rather, an indication that a bargain has been struck within the process of negotiation at work in this workshop activity. These women had finally been offered a counter for which they were - even if only momentarily - prepared to give up their defence of the private spaces represented by this advertisement. Resistance to racism was important to them, forming part of an accepted framework of social criticism. Since analysis of this advertisement could now play a role within such resistance, they were prepared to accept the *general* relevance of such analysis, even when it operates as a resistance to gender. In this way, the participants moved from a known and accepted framework of media analysis (in terms of the representation of race) to a

new perspective on criticising such texts (based on categories of gender).

In my discussion of the first section of the workshop, I argued that the use of drama-techniques in the "speaking out" exercise could be compared to the "suspension of disbelief" which takes place in the relation between viewers and the cinema screen. In both cases, fantasy creates a space in which one is able to explore the fluidity of the categories of identity which defines one's social experience. Both kinds of fantasy could be said to create a space in which one can explore contradictions within one's sense of identity which one usually represses in order to maintain a coherent sense of self. This does not mean, however, that such fantasy is *in itself* subversive; it is in one's response to this exploration that such potential lies. Within the CAP group's discussion of the "speaking out" exercise, this potential was not fully realised; here the fluidity of categories of identity which operate in the role-play was to a large extent closed off again. In this way, the group ensured that differences which existed amongst them were not verbalised - and therefore not openly explored. Here, suspension of disbelief simply offers a release of tension which ensures that anxieties which build up around social contradictions remain containable. In the case of the Nashua advertisement, there was no longer consensus about the need for such containment. It should be remembered that participants' commentary on this text had been defined by a struggle between those who viewed the characters in the advertisement as "real people" and those who accepted the advertisement's status as a deliberate ideological construction. *I would suggest that this was a struggle around the subversive potential of the suspension of disbelief which occurred during the viewing of this advertisement.* This struggle took place, interestingly enough, around a *continuation* of this suspension of disbelief within the discussion itself, *outside the actual viewing process.* This continuation took the form of the treatment, by some members of the discussion, of the characters in the advertisement as "real people". These women were involved in a process of identification which is similar to that which occurs within spectatorial relations. Significantly, this suspension of disbelief functions as a deliberate refusal to verbalise the ideological operation of the text. I would suggest that, as in the case of the "speaking out" exercise, this is a refusal to openly acknowledge the conflicts which existed within the CAP group.



We saw that this struggle was resolved once it was recognised that racial difference played an important role in this advertisement; there was now general agreement about the ideological operation of this text. This does not mean, however, that the underlying conflicts which existed in the group had been resolved. The discussion of racial difference, within this exercise, focused on the relation between "black" and "white" people. I have argued, in the introduction to this chapter, that this level of racial difference had been generally acknowledged within the CAP course. We saw that such difference was acknowledged, specifically, in context of the relationship between participants and facilitators: the participants established a sense of themselves as a tightly-knit group of "black" women in *opposition* to the "white" trainers. I argued that this acknowledgement took place because, given the supposed "neutrality" of facilitators, this particular racial distinction did not lead to a confrontation of conflicts of interest within the CAP group. The acknowledgement of racial difference in the Nashua advertisement took place, I think, in context of this "neutralised" racial distinction. Participants again do not address differences which would lead to a discussion of conflicts of interest existing within the group. In my discussion of the rest of the CAP workshop, I will try to establish whether the women were able to come to a more profound understanding of the differences which exists amongst them.

### 3: As Large as Life<sup>45</sup>

#### **The presentation of workshop material**

Before the screening of this documentary, the women filled in a questionnaire dealing with their attitudes to eating and to their own bodies. After watching the film, they repeated this procedure. During the discussion which followed the screening, participants were asked whether they experienced any changes in their responses to the questionnaire. Miki Van Zijl, who planned and facilitated this exercise, collected the questionnaires at the end of the first day of the workshop and drew up a statistical representation of shifts in the women's attitudes; these she presented to participants during the course of the next day. This analysis

was supposed to provide a further perspective on the shifts in attitude encouraged by viewing the film.

### **The group discussion**

The answering of the questionnaires was clearly intended as an important context for the viewing and discussion of *As Large As Life*. As I understand it, this exercise was intended to enable participants to monitor shifts caused, by viewing the film, in their own attitudes to eating and to their own bodies. In the group discussion, participants would then be able to explore the nature of their interaction with the film. In the discussion which followed the viewing of the film and the completion of questionnaires, many of the women did indeed indicate that their attitudes to body-size and eating had changed - that they now felt more positive about their own bodies, and about fatness. The questionnaire exercise did not, however, succeed for long in focusing discussion on a critical analysis of the participants' response to the film as text. The discussion soon shifted away from the changes in the participants' attitudes to focus more generally on the subject matter of the film. This discussion of the content of the film was valuable, since *As Large As Life* deals with an issue of direct relevance to media education: the role of mass media in reinforcing standards of beauty which most women cannot hope to fulfil. In context of general patterns that emerge within the discussions of video-material in this workshop, it is nevertheless interesting to look at the women's disregard for the film's *construction of meaning*. We saw, in the previous section, that some women were interested in looking closely at the ideological framework which influenced the construction of the Nashua advertisement, while others resisted such analysis. It is, I think, important to make some sense of the difference between this response and that of the discussion of *As Large As Life* - *in which virtually no such interest was expressed*.

In order to gain an understanding of this difference, it is important to take into account the political differences between these two texts. In contrast to the Nashua advertisement, *As Large As Life* positions itself as "feminist". It is possible that this positioning contributed to

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<sup>45</sup> See Appendix A for a brief synopsis of this documentary.

the lack of interest, amongst participants, in the critical analysis of the construction of this film. There may have been a general assumption that it is the task of feminist media education to look at the construction of "politically unsound" material - while "feminist" media can be treated without reference to critical analysis. There is, I think a similarity between this assumption and that of the "evaluative" media education discussed in Chapter 4 - in which the primary function of education project is to draw a distinction between "good" and "bad" media. In the case of evaluative media education, this was a distinction between texts that could form part of a "classical" canon of western cultural texts and those which are destructive to the moral fibre of its audience. Within feminist media education, this becomes a distinction between politically sound and unsound texts. This approach to media education ignores the complex range of political frameworks which inform the construction of meaning in any given media text.

It is also useful to remember the status of the two texts in relation to categories of fiction and fact, education and entertainment. In terms of its status as documentary, *As Large as Life* clearly positioned itself as a factual account. The film suggests, furthermore, that its representation of "fact" is designed to educate rather than entertain. We have already seen that the Nashua advertisement positions itself as fiction and as entertainment. One could argue that it is because of this difference in status that the women debated whether to analyse the first text as a construction of meaning while ignoring this issue in their discussion of the second. I suggested, earlier, that the women who resisted discussion of the Nashua advertisement's construction did so in defence of what they regarded as the "private space" of entertainment. It could be that, in the discussion of a text which positions itself as factual and as education, a different set of norms operate which make the acknowledgement of such construction even more difficult. I would suggest that this difficulty may bear some relations to the distinction, referred to above, between the political positioning of these two texts. It may be no coincidence that two of the "feminist" texts included in this workshop - i.e. *As Large As Life* and *The Accused* - also happened to occupy the status of factual and educational material. Here, the assumption could be that factual texts provide a more appropriate format in which to formulate feminist social criticism: that such texts do not involve themselves in

the "manipulative" relations of power found within, say, Hollywood movies. Through documentary, one can in other words create a feminist "counter cinema", consisting of texts which are free of the manipulative gender relations found in mass media. There would, then, be no need to look critically at the ideological construction of such "feminist" texts.

It is possible to recognise, within this approach to feminist film, assumptions similar to those I pointed out within both the participants' and facilitators' discussion of the exclusion of men from the CAP course. We saw that the women-only environment of the course was supposed to create a space in which the participants would be liberated from exploitative gender relations. I suggested that this approach meant that power relations that did exist within the group were not addressed. It seems to me that if the approach to feminist media texts, described above, was indeed informing this workshop discussion, it would also contribute to this evasion of conflicts existing within the group.

It is nevertheless still possible to detect a tension, within this exercise, between a focus on the content of visual media and an emphasis on the construction of meaning that takes place in the relation between viewers and texts. This tension emerges within the exploration of the political role of media - both within the film itself and in the discussion which followed its screening. An exploration of the theoretical "languages" which operate in both the film and the women's discussion of this issue provides a valuable perspective on the nature of this tension.

I argued, in the previous chapter, that *As Large As Life* deals with an aspect of media which illustrates the operation of the "male gaze" and its affect on the way in which women look at themselves. At the same time, however, the documentary deals with the issue of women's sense of identity in terms of the language of the "sociological" approach to feminist media analysis which I referred to in Chapter 1. Within this language a clear distinction is drawn between, on the one hand, the "falseness" of the images of women offered to us by mass media and, on the other, the "authenticity" of "real" women. Unlike the notion of the "male gaze", this distinction is based on the assumption of the existence of an essential womanhood, beyond social construction. This contradiction can also be found within the participants' discussion which followed the viewing of the film. As I will point out, below,

participants' statements about the relation between themselves and media images were sometimes expressed in terms similar to that of psychoanalytic film theory, and sometimes were comparable to the language of the sociological approach.

Examples of statements which may be related to psychoanalytic film theory can be found in the women's discussion of categories of race. A mention of the newly-elected Miss South Africa swung the discussion onto an exploration of racial aspects of conventional criteria of beauty. The reason for this was that the winner had, for the first time in South African history, been black. A heated debate took place around the fact that she had "straightened her hair" (or, as others suggested, was wearing a wig). Was this a personal choice, or was she "... accepting someone else's idea of what a black woman should look like"? Within this discussion, there were references by certain of the Xhosa-speaking women to "our culture" - by which they meant traditional Xhosa culture. At several points, Xhosa-speaking women argued for the worth of their own bodies by pointing out that traditional Xhosa culture was highly affirmative of the beauty of women with big bodies. "If your wife is too thin", one woman explained, "... it means you are not supporting her". One participant responded critically to this statement by suggesting that, within Xhosa culture, women are then still simply trying to be the way men expect them to be - even if different criteria are being applied to the body. This woman was, I think, interpreting the statement referred to her as a suggestion that acceptance of criteria of beauty within Xhosa culture placed them beyond criticism. An alternative interpretation may have been that the Xhosa woman was arguing that beauty does not exist as an essence, beyond social construction - since, after all, different cultures have disparate criteria for beauty. What I find particularly interesting, here, is that the statement about Xhosa culture *can* be interpreted as a comment about the fact that beauty is in itself a social construction. Similarly, the description of self-worth by the participant whose friends told her that her teeth are "part of [her]" could point to an awareness that one's view of oneself is necessarily determined by the mirror provided by those around one. Within these statements one can detect a consciousness of the influence of culture in general, and media images in particular, on the way in which women look at themselves - a view which comes close to the structuralist notion of the "male gaze".

It is significant that there was a certain awkwardness about the articulation of both the statements referred to above - to the extent that I seem to need to spell out their meaning. The first comment was, as we saw, open to diverse interpretation. The second woman's statement was ambiguous on a different level: her declaration that her teeth were "part" of her was met with hilarity by other participants - since, even though they understood her perfectly, it was possible to interpret her words simply as an assertion that she did not have false teeth. The ambiguity and awkwardness of these statements could point to the fact that these women did not have reference to a "theoretical" language within which the points they were making about media could easily be articulated. In contrast, participants clearly found the language of the sociological approach very accessible. One woman commented on photographs which had been published in that day's paper of the new (black) Miss South Africa. Here, she said, was an example of the way in which values are imposed on women about the way they should look. Like the participant quoted at the beginning of this section, this woman stressed that the image projected by mass media is, in fact, not a "reflection" of the way in which women "really" look:

This way of looking [at ourselves] is coming from somewhere else. These pictures tell us that a real woman has her bones sticking out all over. Does she look like an ordinary woman that we would see in our streets?

Why not, she went on to say, have a fat Miss South Africa? This distinction between "false" images and "real" woman was clearly very meaningful to the participants. It allowed them to distance themselves from the criteria of beauty offered to them by mass media, and thus enabled them to establish a sense of affirmation about the beauty of their own bodies.

The fact that both the film itself and the women in the CAP course, discussed media more easily in terms of a sociological framework can be explained by the fact that this language is in general circulation and informs views of media which are widely accepted in contemporary society. This, I think, is why the film touches on issues that are appropriate to a structuralist analysis of media but then slips into a more sociological approach. It is also partly for this reason that the CAP participants found it easy to articulate evaluations of aspects of media which could be accommodated within the sociological framework while they had difficulty expressing their awareness of views of media which transcend the parameters of

such a framework. In the next part of this chapter, which deals with the second day of the workshop, we will see other examples of this difficulty in articulating comments about the construction of meaning.

Note that the reference to "our culture" by the Xhosa-speaking woman brought to notice an issue - i.e. the "sacredness" of Xhosa culture - which is worth discussing in the context of this group. These references to culture allowed important differences between the participants to surface, highlighting tensions which existed between the older Xhosa-speaking women and other women on the course. We will see that, within later discussions, repeated references were made to this issue. We will see that, within later discussions, we could have encouraged the group to look more closely at these differences. In this way, we may have been able to come to grips with some of the conflicts which, as I have argued above, we were avoiding in other parts of our discussions.

In the examination, above, of the first day of the CAP workshop, we can begin to detect certain patterns within the women's responses to media analysis. I have focused on the degree to which the participants acknowledged the negotiation which took place between themselves as viewers and the subject positions offered to them by these texts. I would say that, through the "speaking out" role-play and the viewing of the advertisement and documentary, these women gained access to contradictions and tensions within which their sense of identity was based. In the group discussions following both the role-play and the viewing of the video material, the women were asked to talk about this exploration. It seems to me that the women took up this challenge in varying degrees-but that, in the end, the discussions tended to function as a process of closure.

I would say that this "closing off" of the subversive potential of the role-play and viewing process is directly related to the group's reluctance to discuss social differences which existed amongst them. More specifically, their response was linked to their reluctance to involve themselves in discussions which would mean confronting conflicts of interest existing within the group. We saw, for example, that the fluid approach to categories of gender which operated within the role-play were closed off - and, in the same moment, the discussion of power relations existing within the group. Similarly, it was a category of

difference which was labelled within the framework of the course as "neutral" which led to the group's consensus to discuss the ideological operation of the Nashua advertisement. We also saw that the assumption, in the discussion of *As Large As Life*, that there is no need to critically analyse "feminist" texts contributes to the notion that no exploitative gender relations exist within the separate, women-only environment of the course.

A second factor which contributed to the "closing off" of the subversive potential of the role-play and viewing was the women's lack of access to a language of analysis which would realise this potential. It seems to me that the framework of the course itself did not provide such a language. It was, for example, this general framework which led to the pinning down of the fluid categories of gendered identity which operated within the "speaking out" exercise. Furthermore, the notion of a feminist "counter cinema" which, I suggested, informed the discussion of *As Large As Life*, could be said to have formed part of the general framework of the course. We also saw that, in this particular discussion, the women did indeed begin to explore the construction of meaning which occurred between viewers and texts - but found it difficult to articulate these ideas. I argued that this difficulty related to the fact that the language of media analysis most available to these women did not provide them with terms which allowed the articulation of these ideas.

In the next chapter, I will show that these patterns also surfaced within the discussions which took place on the second day of the workshop.



## THE CAP VIDEO WORKSHOP:

### Day Two

#### **4: *The Accused*, *Thelma and Louise* and the Steers advertisements**

This section is divided into three interconnected parts. Participants were encouraged to draw relations between the material viewed in each of these parts. They were also invited to draw connections between this section and the material that was viewed the previous day. My description of the group discussions, below, will illustrate the importance of these interconnections.

#### **Section 4.1: *The Accused***

##### **Presentation of the material**

We began, on the morning of the second day, by looking at a sequence from *The Accused*. After the viewing, I asked the participants what they thought of the way in which the main character, Sarah, behaved in this sequence. Once several positions on this issue had been established within the group, I told them that, in the section of the film which follows this sequence, Sarah is gang-raped while a crowd of onlookers clap and cheer. I then asked a second question: who is responsible for Sarah's rape? After this, my questions were very much determined by the direction taken within the discussion.

##### **The group discussion**

The women focused immediately, in their discussion of this sequence, on the possible violent consequences of Sarah's drinking, flirting and dancing. It should be noted, here, that no one in the group had heard of *The Accused* before, and it was only long after this focus on violence had been established that I informed them that the sequence which they had viewed was followed by one in which Sarah is gang-raped. One reason for this may have been that there was, in fact, a sinister quality to the sequence, which could have alerted the women to the fact that Sarah would be experiencing some form of violent retribution for her actions. Throughout the sequence there is, for example, a slow build-up of glances: we see Sarah's friend looking worried, and we see the men in the games room staring at Sarah, and

exchanging meaningful looks. One could say that, by means of the juxtaposition of these images with those of Sarah's behaviour, the sequence already establishes a link between female sexuality and the threat of violence against women. This could be one reason why the CAP group chose to focus on the threat of violence.

It seems significant, however, that, even though the group saw only one sequence from *The Accused*, the statements and counter-statements made during the resulting discussion were similar to those of the argument developed in the film as a whole. One would have to conclude that the film dealt with a series of debates that were very familiar to these women. The women in the CAP workshop seemed well acquainted with the basic principles informing contemporary feminist debates such as those described in Chapter 2. There I pointed out that these debates tend to deal with the issue of female sexuality almost exclusively in terms of the concern raised by the CAP participants: that of violence against women. This framework of reference could, then, be a second factor informing the women's focus on the possible violent consequences for Sarah's behaviour. The sequence from *The Accused* could, in other words, have triggered off the expression of arguments about which these women felt strongly.

I also argued, in Chapter 2, that the terms which define contemporary feminist debates restrict their subversive potential. This, I suggested in Chapter 3, may be why *The Accused* was able to incorporate these debates with such ease into a cinematic language which feminist film theory regards as innately conservative. We will see, below, that many of the weaknesses I ascribed to these feminist debates can be recognised within the CAP group's discussion of *The Accused*. I will look, below, at the similarity between the women's arguments and those of the feminist debates discussed in Chapter 2. Here I will demonstrate the problematic implications of these debates for the dynamics which were developing within the CAP group.

We saw, in Chapter 2, that feminist debates often assumed that women, in establishing their own sexual identity, face a choice between freedom and security, and between individual self-actualisation and community support. It would seem that this tendency can also be recognised within the feminist framework which operated within the CAP group. In their discussion of this issue, the CAP group seemed divided into two camps regarding the issue of responsibility for violence against women. On the one hand, there were those who felt that we have to accept that we live in a world in which the claiming of sexual freedom, by

women, is met with violence. If women then still insist on such freedom, they should bear the responsibility for the consequences of their own actions. This viewpoint formed the basis of a deep disapproval of Sarah's behaviour, on the grounds that she was endangering herself.

"She behaved in a very bad way," one woman commented: "... she was inviting the men to do what they wanted. She was the only woman there." Another woman agreed, saying: "If she became a victim, who would be the witness, as she was the only woman there?" Someone else added: "Are the women not aware that they are victims? They must not behave in that way." The suggestion, here, was that women have to take responsibility for the fact that their lives are defined by a choice between pleasure and security. On the other hand, there were those participants who felt that women have the right to express their own sexuality without fear of retribution, and should therefore not be regarded as responsible if they are raped. One participant said, for example, that it is a "free country", and Sarah should be allowed to "behave as she wants" and to "dance as she wants". She should not be expected to restrict her behaviour because of the threat of violence. The suggestion, here, seemed to be that women should not be held responsible for the fact that they live in a world in which they are offered pleasure only at the cost of vulnerability.

The positions established in this debate did not undergo any change after I explained that Sarah had in fact been raped. We moved, rather, to an exploration of the implications of these positions for a discussion of Sarah's rape. The focus, here, was on whether Sarah was responsible for having been raped. One woman said, in defence of Sarah, that she had not realised that there was a possibility of danger. "She did not expect those people to take advantage of her" this woman explained, "... and that is why she was enjoying herself with them". Another woman said weightily:

She was drunk and what did she expect if she got drunk. It was her responsibility if she was drunk when she got raped.

Again, we see that both these women accepted the validity of the belief that women face a choice between pleasure and freedom on the one hand and safety on the other - and they accepted the relevance of this belief to an attempt to establish who was responsible for the rape. I would suggest that, by accepting that the parameters of the debate was defined in this way, the group became caught in an argument which could only veer back and forth between its two opposite poles - with little hope of resolution. This, I think, is why the positions

within this argument stayed the same throughout.

Those who argued that Sarah was not responsible for the rape made repeated references to the fact that she did not want to be raped. One woman pointed out, for example, that Sarah's pleasure in dancing must not be confused with desire to be raped. Another remarked that Sarah had, in fact, "said no". Someone else exclaimed: "What woman goes out and says 'rape me'?" "Why", another asked, "do men feel invited?" The implied statement, here, was that, by definition, rape is not an invited act and that the responsibility for rape must therefore be placed squarely on the shoulders of the rapists. This is, obviously, a crucial statement to make about the issue of responsibility for violence against women. We saw, in Chapter 2, that the insistence that women do not enjoy being raped played a central role in feminist critiques of the argument that women are responsible for sexual crimes committed against them. At the same time, as I argued in Chapter 2, there are very few other legitimate statements that a woman can make about her sexual identity and experience within a debate defined by the dualism of freedom versus safety. In other words, the most powerful statement a woman can make, within the restrictions of this debate, is "no".

The CAP debate was posited, furthermore, on the essentialist approach to sexual identity in feminist debates discussed in Chapter 2. Both those who argued that Sarah was responsible for being raped and those who placed the blame on the rapists spoke of "essential" differences between men and women. References to alcohol played a crucial role within this discussion of difference. One woman argued, for example, that men rape women because of their basic opinion of women, and that this opinion remains the same no matter how women behave. This opinion is shared, furthermore, by all men - even those close to you, whom you trust. Whether you stay at home or go out, you will still face this treatment by men (it is interesting to note that, here, the opposition between self-actualisation and security begins to break down):

Men have filthy ideas about us. Even if you dress in a dignified way they behave the same way. Men, even friends, behave the same way in your home - especially when drinking liquor.

The implication, here, seemed to be that men's inhibitions are weakened by drinking, and once these inhibitions fall away, it is revealed that even the nicest of men share the same

"filthy" opinion of women as other men do. The argument around Sarah's drinking focused, similarly, on the idea that drinking made her "lose control" of her sexual impulses. However, some of the comments made about her implied that, for women, this loss of control is not so much an uncovering of their essential sexual identity as a betrayal of that identity. The suggestion was that there is a basic difference between men and women's sexuality, which means that women bear a greater responsibility within sexual encounters. For a woman, the loss of control brought on by alcohol means that she forsakes her natural womanly tendency towards controlling her sexual desires. "Men are wild animals", one participant announced; "... woman are better because they control themselves". This, she suggested, means that if a woman does not want to have sex with a man, she has the responsibility not to arouse that man.

I argued, in Chapter 2, that this essentialism is rooted in a discomfort, in feminist debates, about the existence of social differences between woman. Within the CAP debate around *The Accused* - as in the rest of the course - this discomfort can also be detected. The group explored the implications of social differences between women in terms of references to culture. It was repeatedly argued that, in looking at women's behaviour and the implications for their responsibility for being raped, one must take cultural context into account. "This thing depends on the individual" one woman said; "... it is related to culture". Another commented that one's understanding of the right way to behave in public will depend "... on the way you were reared as a woman". Someone referred, in context of this discussion, to traditional Xhosa culture:

In our culture there is a ceremony called 'inchocho' for young men and women where they come together and drink the whole night. According to our culture there are no rules [about women drinking in public] except for the religious people.

As with the comments quoted from the discussion of *As Large As Life*, these references to culture can be interpreted in more ways than one. On the one hand, the suggestion may be that a woman should be judged according to the criteria which operate in her own cultural environment. These criteria must, then, determine whether she bears responsibility for her own rape. On the other hand, this woman may be suggesting that, since cultural norms differ, one should not automatically accept the inherent correctness of any single set of norms. Here one can no longer simply judge a woman's behaviour according to her particular

cultural context. It would seem, then, that within this debate, as with the discussion of *As Large as Life*, the meaning of references to social differences between the women remained ambiguous. I would suggest that this ambiguity could be linked to the fact that there existed, within this CAP project, a general discomfort about these social differences. As I argued in the case of *As Large As Life*, these statements could also be ambiguous because the group did not have access to a discourse in which ideas about differences between women can be expressed with ease.

It is, I think, useful to compare the discussions which resulted, respectively, from the viewing of the Nashua advertisement the sequence from *The Accused*. Both these texts provoked lively debates within the CAP group. In the discussion of the Nashua advertisement, strong differences of opinion were expressed about the ideological framework informing this text. The sequence from *The Accused* also generated a heated debate - this time, as we saw above, around women's sexuality and the apportionment, within society, of responsibility for sexual violence against women. It seems to me, however, that the two texts were positioned very differently within these debates. In the first case, the CAP group was divided between those women who criticised the ideological framework upon which the Nashua advertisement is based, and those who defended the text from such criticism. This discussion was, in other words, divided between women who opposed the political framework of the text and those women who aligned themselves with this framework. In the second case, there was a general lack of interest in a critical analysis of the text itself. I have already suggested, above, that the opposing positions within the debate which took place around sexuality and violence fall within the parameters set by the film itself around the social analysis of these issues. This lack of critical perspective can, I think, be linked to the fact that the group did not treat *The Accused* as a construction - and chose, instead, to "suspend disbelief" by treating the characters as real people.

One reason for this lack of critical perspective on the film may have been that the group identified closely with the political framework of this film. Their suspension of disbelief could, in other words, have the same function as that of the women who refused to become involved in a critical analysis of the Nashua advertisement. Their response to the text is, at the same time, similar to the way they treated *As Large As Life*. I argued, earlier, that it was assumed, within this discussion of *As Large As Life*, that feminist media education is

designed to challenge "politically unsound" material - while "feminist" media can be treated without reference to critical analysis. This assumption may also have informed the discussion of *The Accused*. I have already pointed out that this distinction between politically sound and unsound material ignores the complex range of ideological frameworks which inform the construction of meaning in any given media text.

I have also argued that the women's lack of critical perspective on *As Large As Life* could be linked to its documentary status. Despite being fiction and forming part of the cinematic institution of Hollywood entertainment, it is possible to argue that *The Accused* occupies a similar status: that of a "factual" and educational film. This status is achieved, for example, through the "gritty" quality of the images, and the general status of the story as "evidence" of the seriousness of rape. As with *As Large As Life*, this factual/educational status must be understood in context of the political positioning of the film. Again, the assumption could be that, through this status, texts which operate as feminist social criticism can avoid involving themselves in the manipulative relations of power found in entertainment media. Such a text is then, supposedly, in no need of critical deconstruction.

It seems to me that it is very important to challenge these assumptions about women's position in society and about feminist media. We have seen, in my discussion of this film in Chapter 3, that *The Accused* is based in a very conservative analysis of issues such as women's right to sexual liberation and the issue of violence against women. We saw, furthermore, that the discussion triggered off, within the CAP group, by the viewing of the sequence from this film contained many of the elements of this conservative analysis. At the same time it would be difficult to challenge this framework of social criticism within the isolated context of the discussion of a text such as *The Accused*. Such a challenge could more usefully take place in context of the other screenings which formed part of Section 4.

## **4.2: Thelma and Louise**

### **Presentation of material**

This section began with a brief reference to *The Accused*. I described to the participants the actions of Sarah's friend, Sally, during the rape scene - i.e. that, when she saw what was

happening, she deserted her friend in order to protect herself. I explained that, in *Thelma and Louise*, a man attempts to rape Thelma, and her friend Louise reacts in a very different way to Sally in *The Accused*: she comes to Thelma's defence with a gun. I then sketched the context of the sequence we would watch, explaining that the truck driver had repeatedly passed Thelma and Louise on the road, and had harassed them. I invited the participants to compare this sequence to the one from *The Accused*. I asked them, in particular, to assess the different ways in which these films seem to present women's ability to defend themselves and others against violence.

### **The group discussion**

The women's first comments about this sequence were similar to those they made in relation to *The Accused*. Here, too, they talked about the characters as if they were real people. They also focused, again, on an evaluation of the behaviour of the characters; should they have blown up the truck? Some of the women felt that Thelma and Louise should not have responded in this way, since violence only leads to more violence. "He will do the same thing again because he wasn't sorry", said one participant, while another asked rhetorically: "Will he not hate women more now?" Someone else disagreed, saying; "Maybe he will think twice before intimidating other women". Some people felt that the violent revenge, on the part of women, must be understood within the context of the fact that society does not protect women from sexual harassment. "What he has done is not a crime in society", explained one participant "... so we have to take [the law] into our own hands".

The discussion rapidly shifted away, however, from this focus on the subject matter of the sequence. Instead, the women began to explore the film's existence as a constructed text. This shift occurred when one participant commented on the semiotics of *Thelma and Louise*. She suggested that the truck was a symbol of the driver's "manhood". She commented, to the delight of the rest of the group: "He stripped them of their dignity so they stripped him of his truck". Her suggestion seemed to be that the sequence is a celebration of an act of symbolic castration.

Besides this one comment on the symbolism of the film, the discussion of its construction of meaning primarily took the form of an exploration of its "message" and of the importance of gender roles within this message. When, in context of this exploration, I



invited the group to compare *Thelma and Louise* to *The Accused*, it became apparent that the women were very much in agreement in their assessment of the two films. There was consensus that the message of *The Accused* was that, because of the threat of danger, "... women must always respect men". They preferred the message of *Thelma and Louise*, which, they said, showed that women can "feel powerful" when they "team up". One woman commented, here:

The second film shows that men take us as sex objects, but if we can become powerful by being together they can see that this can be dangerous for them too.

It was pointed out that *The Accused* signalled a very different message - i.e. that such solidarity between women is unlikely.

In their discussion of the gender roles given to the characters in *Thelma and Louise*, participants commented that these women had taken up roles which were normally reserved, in films, for men. As one woman succinctly put it, "Men normally blow up things". Another woman explained that women are not usually "... focused on as fighters". The suggestion was, I think, that, through this reversal of gender roles, the film was challenging conventional gender categories in a way that made it seem possible for women to fight against their own oppression - whether by means of physical violence or otherwise.

Within the above we can see that, unlike any of the previous discussions of media texts in this workshop, the examination of the sequence from *Thelma and Louise* moved with ease to an exploration of the construction of meaning in the text. The participants seemed interested and enthusiastic about discussing the film at this level. This change may have been produced by the structure of the workshop itself. Through the process of discussing the previous texts in this workshop, the women probably developed a greater dexterity at the analysis of media texts. At the same time, I have argued that the degree to which the women involved themselves in the critical analysis of the texts was not just an indication of their level of analytical skill but also of their *willingness to invest* in this process of analysis. I would therefore propose that the political positioning of the sequence from *Thelma and Louise* was also a factor in the women's immediate interest in the critical analysis of this text. It seems to me that there are important differences between the political position of this sequence and the other video material presented so far in this workshop. It is this positioning which, I think,

interested the CAP group in a discussion of the semantic construction of this text.

Here, then, we can find an explanation for the difference in the participants' reaction to the Nashua advertisement and the sequence from *Thelma and Louise*. I have argued that the participants who resisted the analysis of the Nashua advertisement did so in defence of what they regarded as the "private space" of entertainment. I proposed, furthermore, that these women assumed that the pleasure of watching the advertisement would be lost through the process of analysis. I would say that the women were correct in assuming that analysis would destroy their pleasure in the Nashua advertisement - but not because analysis necessarily destroys entertainment. It is, rather, that *in the case of the Nashua advertisement*, feminist analysis necessarily leads to the critique of a political position in which these participants had made an important investment. In the sequence from *Thelma and Louise*, the women could immediately recognise that it was to their own advantage to identify with the political position of the film.

What could have made the political positioning of this sequence particularly attractive to the CAP group was the fact that it dissolves the opposition between feminist analysis and the pleasures of entertainment. In order to grasp the full significance of this point, it is useful to refer, briefly, to the approach taken with the film as a whole. Like *The Accused* and *As Large As Life*, *Thelma and Louise* positions itself as a feminist text. We have seen, in Chapter 3, that *The Accused* does so by aligning itself with "politically correct" cinema - of which the main function is supposedly to educate - and by denying its own involvement in the institutions of mainstream cinema, which is primarily concerned with entertainment. In the present chapter, we saw that *As Large As Life* sets up a similar division between politically correct, educational film and the exploitative potential of mainstream entertainment media. *Thelma and Louise* dissolves this division between "good", educational media and "bad" entertaining media. This can be seen in the playful commentary, within this film, on mainstream cinema genres such as the "road movie", the "buddy movie" and the Western. The film celebrates these institutions, but also restates them in new terms - which can be described as feminist. One example of this appropriation can be seen in the replacement of the two male characters traditional to "buddy movies" with two women. Another more general example is the film's delight in the sheer wild fantasy of mainstream cinema - and its creation, through such fantasy, of a space in which two women can liberate themselves from

the restrictions of their everyday lives. In this way, the film establishes a much more ambiguous and complex relationship to the institutions of mainstream media than that of *The Accused* and *As Large As Life*. *Instead of setting up a strict division between "politically correct" and "exploitative" media, the film creates a fluid, ambiguous interplay between traditional cinematic institutions and their feminist appropriation. This process can be recognised even within the one short sequence from Thelma and Louise which was viewed during the workshop. This sequence seems to align itself both with texts like the Nashua advertisement (in terms of its entertainment value) and to films like As Large As Life and The Accused (in terms of its critique of mainstream media and its commitment to feminist principles). In this way, the sequence transcends the opposition between feminist and mainstream media, and between serious feminist analysis and pleasurable viewing.*

It is, I think, therefore not surprising that it was in the context of a discussion of this text that the CAP group managed to transcend the opposition between critical analysis and viewing pleasure. The women clearly enjoyed analysing the sequence from *Thelma and Louise* and did not regard this process as a destruction of the pleasure derived from watching the sequence. During the course of this discussion, I asked the women to describe their own emotional responses to the text. It seems to me that their responses to this question took place in the context of an exploration of the constructed nature of the text. They focused, here, on their own enjoyment of the sequence - and their analysis of this experience did not destroy this pleasure. When, for example, I asked them how it made them feel to see Thelma and Louise "getting their own back", they responded with gleeful appreciation. One could say that they spoke, here, of their own spectatorial pleasure with an acknowledgement of the role played in this pleasure by a suspension of disbelief.

I have argued, in my discussion of the media discussed in this workshop, that there is subversive potential within the viewing process. Through fantasy and through humour, restrictions are lifted on viewers' ability to explore the contradictions within which their social identity is based. This is definitely true of the sequence from *Thelma and Louise*. The humorous approach to violence against men, in this film, serves a similar function to its strong emphasis on fantasy. Both fantasy and humour provide structures in which violent anger can be expressed safely - that is, without fear of personal repercussions. I have proposed, however, that the realisation of this potential depends on decisions made by the

it was a real event - and that this "... shows how powerful media is". I myself added that we must remember that the film was carefully and deliberately constructed. It was, however, not these direct comments that brought the discussion back to the level of textual analysis. The shift back to this level of discussion occurred, rather, at the point described earlier, when I asked participants to compare *Thelma and Louise* to *The Accused*. One could argue that the participants did not feel able to speak in a self-reflective manner about the process they were involved in. This could be because they were simply not interested in such a discussion, or because they did not really have access to the theoretical language which such a discussion would demand.

At the end of the discussion of *Thelma and Louise*, I asked participants how they thought men would react to this film. In their responses to this question we can, again, see a strict differentiation between the "nature" of men and women. There seemed to be general agreement that, in contrast to women, men would react very negatively to the film. One woman said that the sequence we had watched would make men feel "very bad"; they would not feel "comfortable", and this might make them "think twice" about harassing women. Another woman added that after watching this film, something inside a man may say "jy, pasop"<sup>47</sup> when he thinks of harassing a woman. It was also felt that men would "... criticise the film because it allowed women to have guns etc". These comments allowed me to link the discussion of *Thelma and Louise* to that of the next section.

### 4.3: The Steers advertisements

#### Presentation of the material

When the women spoke, above, of possible critical responses to *Thelma and Louise*, I explained that the Steers advertisement could be seen as such a response. Another facilitator pointed out, here, that it must be remembered that this advertisement was produced by a woman. Her point was that one should not make the assumption that one's response to this film would be determined by one's gender. A woman is as capable as a man of deliberately

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<sup>47</sup> This afrikaans phrase could be roughly translated as "Hey you, watch it."

lashing out at a film because it is "feminist". I asked the women to decide, while watching the first version of the advertisement, what the differences are between the sequence presented here and the scene in *Thelma and Louise*. During the course of the discussion which followed, I also explained that, like the Nashua advertisement shown on the previous day, the Steers advertisement provoked so much critical comment that it was withdrawn from broadcasting, and replaced with a second version<sup>48</sup>. We then watched this version, and compared it to the first.

### **The group discussion**

In the discussion of the Steers advertisement, one participant immediately pointed out that the text had "reversed the roles" of the characters in *Thelma and Louise*. I think the suggestion, here, was that while, in the film, the women were righteous avengers and the man is shown as deserving of punishment, these roles are inverted in the advertisement. There was general agreement about this analysis. Another woman commented, here, that in *Thelma and Louise* "... the guy is the bad guy", while the advertisement suggests that "the women are bodies". She added that the message of the advertisement is that "... men rape women because they want to be raped". It also pointed out that in *Thelma and Louise* women are "more in control", while in the advertisement the men are back in control. This exploration of the advertisement's reversal of the sequence from *Thelma and Louise* was developed throughout the discussion which followed. The group spoke, for example, about the way in which the *Thelma and Louise* sequence had broken the rules which operated in the Nashua advertisement, *As Large as Life* and *The Accused* by showing women who successfully reject the role of "sex object". The Steers advertisement is a response to this transgression of rules: it "... puts women back into the place of object". One participant commented that this reversal shows that *Thelma and Louise* had some people "running scared". They had, she said, "... to show that men aren't so bad" and that "... it is women that seduce them". The suggestion, here, was that in deliberately changing the meaning of the film, the advertisement acknowledged its subversive power.

At this point, I showed the second version of the advertisement and asked participants

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<sup>48</sup> Recently, the first version has again appeared on television.

to compare it to the first. There was general consent, within the group, that the second version was "better". I pointed out, during this discussion, that the Steers advertisement was still making use of many of the oppressive ideas about women we had explored within the first version - such as can be found in the equation between women and food. Participants responded by saying that the second version was nevertheless still "better" than the first - since at least it was "not sexual". The suggestion may have been, here, that, in the second version, the equation between women and food is not placed within a sexual context, and that this advertisement is therefore less offensive.

The discussion of the Steers advertisement ended when one participant declared: "The poor boy needed a lift and was hungry, but still owned his Chippendale muscles"-at which point the whole group laughed uproariously. I would propose that this comment operated as a deliberate re-opening of the debate around the relevance, to these women, of feminist media analysis. It is possible to observe a strong similarity between this woman's statement and the comment made at the beginning of the workshop - i.e. that the Nashua advertisement was simply an innocent story about a boy who gives "love messages" to little girls. The women's response to the second version of the Steers advertisement thus comes full circle to the defence of spectatorial pleasure which we saw in the case of the Nashua text. The reference to the attractiveness of the character's body suggests, however, that in this case it is at least partly the pleasure of the *subject* of the gaze. Here, then, is an important difference between the resistance to the analysis of the Nashua text and that of the Steers text. In the first case, such resistance acted as a refusal to criticise the conventional positions offered to men and women respectively within sexual relations. It was therefore accepted as "natural" that men should be the subjects of sexual desire and women the objects. In the second case, the refusal to take up a critical stance to the ideological operation of the advertisement is accompanied by a deliberate reversal of these roles: here, the poor hungry "Chippendale boy" is regarded as the object of the women's appreciative gaze.

We have already seen that humour played an important role within the material chosen for this workshop. I have suggested that the women's responses to this aspect of the video material could throw further light on the struggle which was taking place, within this workshop, around viewing pleasure. This point is especially relevant to the discussion that took place around the Steers texts.

Like the Nashua text, the narrative of this advertisement takes the form of a joke. We "mistake" the truck driver's responses for aggressive sexual arousal, and must then be surprised that, in fact, his attention had all along been focused not on the women but on the fast food they are eating. The Steers text offers this anticlimax as cause for amusement. In my view, the melodramatic build-up to this anticlimax is, in fact, genuinely funny. This is especially true of the shot in which the driver advances on the women in the car, pauses for a moment and hitches up his belt. This shot is taken from below, so that the frame is mostly filled by the truck driver's crotch, while his head towers far above in the blue sky. As he hitches up his belt, there is an impressive booming noise on the soundtrack, and a sign flashes in the corner of the frame, saying "REAL MEAT". One could argue that, through this representation of the truck driver, the advertisement pokes fun at macho images of male sexual identity. In this context, the representation of the women can be similarly interpreted as making fun of the female counterpart to this macho male: the sexy bimbo.

One must, however, evaluate this joke in context of the operation of the advertisement as a whole. Here it is important to look at the text's status as an inversion of the sequence from *Thelma and Louise*. In this film, the truck driver clearly represents the worst aspects of macho culture. There are, in fact, similarities between the film's treatment of this symbol of machismo and the mocking (if, admittedly, more mildly satirical) representation of the truck driver in the advertisement. In the film, this man is understood to be representative of a culture which gives rise to the abuse of women by men. He seems to view *Thelma and Louise* in very much the same terms as those in which the women in the Steers text are represented; as objects, available for men's sexual pleasure. The explosion of the truck becomes, in this context, a violent rejection, by *Thelma and Louise*, of the status of sex object and a triumphant revenge on those who force them into this status. I have proposed, above, that *Thelma and Louise* offers this moment of revenge as a gleefully violent joke - one in a series of jokes that *Thelma and Louise* play on men. It seems to me that the Steers advertisement responds to this joke by turning it on its head: here, the violent joke is on women.

It would, I think, be valuable to explore the role that these sequences play in the ideological struggles around the representation of violence in terms of their status as jokes. I would suggest that both texts depend on the format of the joke to bypass restrictions on the

conventions of what is permissible in terms of the public expression of desire for violence. One could argue that, both in the sequence from the film and the advertisement, the jokes are expressions of the wish to do violence-the difference between the two texts simply lies in the object of this violence. It is interesting to note that, in both cases, the success of the joke depends on the fact that this violence is *deflected*. If Thelma and Louise had shot the man instead of the truck, most of the potential audience of this film would no longer regard their act of revenge as funny. In the case of the Steers text, it is clearly the act of deflection in itself which is supposed to make the advertisement funny: we have already seen that the joke takes the form of an anticlimax. This deflection also occurs on a more symbolic level; the message seems to be that we need not take seriously the suggestion of violence in these texts since they are, after all "just jokes".

We see, here, the creation of a space that is very similar to that which is established within the context of a cinematic "suspension of disbelief". I have argued that spectatorial pleasure offers viewers a safe space in which to explore the contradictions within which their sense of identity is based. I pointed out that, within mainstream cinema, this space is usually closed off again at the end of a film. The exploration of contradictions thus remains contained within the conservative framework of the film as a whole. It seems to me that jokes can be said to perform a very similar function. As with spectatorial pleasure, they offer a safe space in which we can address aspects of our social existence which would otherwise be too painful or awkward to talk about. This space is necessitated by the fact that the contradictions in which our ideological framework is based cause us enough discomfort to necessitate some exploration. Again, as with spectatorial pleasure, this exploration tends to operate as a way of *containing* such contradictions rather than facilitating their transformation. I have argued that spectatorial pleasure nevertheless offers the *potential* for such transformation - and, it seems to me that the same could be said of jokes.

In the context of the above, it would have been valuable for the CAP participants to have explored their own responses to the advertisement in terms of its status as a joke. One could have examined, for example, the reasons why the women clearly did not think the first version of the advertisement was funny. This was presumably because they could not identify with the ideological position of the joke. At the same time, there are contradictory elements within this joke: as pointed out above, the melodramatic treatment of the truck driver's



masculinity is very similar to the mockery of the truckdriver in *Thelma and Louise*. A discussion of these contradictions could, I think, have deepened the group's understanding of the operation of the advertisement as a whole. It would also be interesting to look, within such a discussion, at the fact that the second version of the Steers advertisement is no longer humorous. One could attempt to establish whether this lack of humour in itself makes any difference to the political position of the advertisement.

The remark that the character in the second version of the advertisement was simply a "poor boy" who "... needed a lift and was hungry - but still owned his Chippendale muscles" is also of relevance within an evaluation of the operation of jokes in the workshop. This remark was partly intended as a joke, to which the rest of the group responded with appreciation. I pointed out, above, that this statement represents a deliberate resistance to the critical analysis of the second advertisement. I would now add that it is no coincidence that this statement took the form of a joke. As argued earlier, jokes often operate as a deflection - a way of avoiding the *serious* discussion of social problems. At the same time, this particular joke could be said to be an elaboration on the more subversive elements of the joke presented within the first version of the Steers advertisement. It deals, in other words, with masculinity in ironically appreciative terms. One could in fact argue that it takes this joke much further than the advertisement does, by placing it in the context of a personal affirmation of female sexual desire. In this way, the joke is inverted for a second time, reinstating women in the position of subjects of spectatorial pleasure.

One could argue that the second Steers advertisement is, after all, "better" than the first, since it offered the CAP participants the possibility of taking up the position of subject of a spectatorial gaze within which a man is the object. It must be noted, however, that here, too, there is an equation between women and food, as well as the suggestion that this food is meant to be consumed by a man. In the first advertisement, the woman turned into a hamburger, to be devoured by the truckdriver, while in the second, the Chippendale cowboy dreams of a burger and Coke and turns around to find his wish fulfilled in the shape of the two women in the open car. The formulae on which the narrative is based in the first advert (i.e. Woman Equals Burger) remains the same, even if it is reversed (i.e. Burger and Coke Equals Women). I would argue, therefore, that although the second version offers women the possibility of taking on the position of subject of a spectatorial gaze, this possibility is, in the

exchanging meaningful looks. One could say that, by means of the juxtaposition of these images with those of Sarah's behaviour, the sequence already establishes a link between female sexuality and the threat of violence against women. This could be one reason why the CAP group chose to focus on the threat of violence.

It seems significant, however, that, even though the group saw only one sequence from *The Accused*, the statements and counter-statements made during the resulting discussion were similar to those of the argument developed in the film as a whole. One would have to conclude that the film dealt with a series of debates that were very familiar to these women. The women in the CAP workshop seemed well acquainted with the basic principles informing contemporary feminist debates such as those described in Chapter 2. There I pointed out that these debates tend to deal with the issue of female sexuality almost exclusively in terms of the concern raised by the CAP participants: that of violence against women. This framework of reference could, then, be a second factor informing the women's focus on the possible violent consequences for Sarah's behaviour. The sequence from *The Accused* could, in other words, have triggered off the expression of arguments about which these women felt strongly.

I also argued, in Chapter 2, that the terms which define contemporary feminist debates restrict their subversive potential. This, I suggested in Chapter 3, may be why *The Accused* was able to incorporate these debates with such ease into a cinematic language which feminist film theory regards as innately conservative. We will see, below, that many of the weaknesses I ascribed to these feminist debates can be recognised within the CAP group's discussion of *The Accused*. I will look, below, at the similarity between the women's arguments and those of the feminist debates discussed in Chapter 2. Here I will demonstrate the problematic implications of these debates for the dynamics which were developing within the CAP group.

We saw, in Chapter 2, that feminist debates often assumed that women, in establishing their own sexual identity, face a choice between freedom and security, and between individual self-actualisation and community support. It would seem that this tendency can also be recognised within the feminist framework which operated within the CAP group. In their discussion of this issue, the CAP group seemed divided into two camps regarding the issue of responsibility for violence against women. On the one hand, there were those who felt that we have to accept that we live in a world in which the claiming of sexual freedom, by

have developed in this thesis, media education should be viewed, rather, as an ongoing process in which the acknowledgement of the political operation of media is constantly renegotiated. I would now add that the final aim of media education is not to reach a point at which participants become "literate" about the operation of media. Instead, participants will constantly shift, within the process of struggle that defines media education, between what I have referred to as a "suspension of disbelief" and an acknowledgement of the importance of analysis. These shifts will be determined by their own assessment, in each case, of the personal advantages of the analysis of a given text.

## **Section 5: The CAP video**

### **Presentation of the material**

At the end of the workshop, we watched the tape which had been recorded on the first morning. The women spoke about their reactions to watching themselves on video, and about ways in which they would like to improve on the tape. During the course of this discussion, we repeatedly stopped to view the tape again.

### **The group discussion**

In their evaluation of the video tape, the CAP participants were very critical of their own performance. "It's the first time I have seen myself on TV," said one woman glumly, "...and I'm not so sure how I feel." Another remarked: "I feel a bit disgusted - I don't feel so good about myself". This response was echoed by everyone in the group. I think that it was an example of that familiar discomfort that many people experience at seeing themselves on screen or in a photograph. I would argue that an exploration of this discomfort could be of great value within a media education programme. It seems to me, furthermore, that the context provided by the CAP video workshop as a whole opened unique opportunities for such an exploration. In order to illustrate this point, I will look at two aspects of this context which, I think, enabled us to throw some light on the women's feeling of dissatisfaction with video tape.

The first important point of reference for this discussion was the other video material

that had been viewed and discussed during the workshop-and, more generally, the material broadcast on South African television with which these women were familiar. Here it must be explained that the women were clearly measuring their performance on camera against the criteria of "polished" television programmes. This comparison allowed facilitators to link the discussion to the points that had been made throughout the weekend about mainstream television.

The women were, for example, critical of the lack of editing in the CAP video, commenting that "... it must not be seen that a person is leaving and coming in." In other words, one should not have to watch each woman walking on camera and off again. Facilitators pointed out that participants were evaluating the footage in terms of the criteria in which the conventions of mainstream television is based. It was in terms of these conventions that this unedited, "real time" performance seemed "wrong". It seems to me that this discussion also offered an opportunity for participants to explore their own participation in the construction of the illusion of reality in mainstream television. The demand that the material should be edited was a demand for the application of the codes through which this illusion of reality is constructed. As such, the women illustrated their own "literacy" regarding these codes.

The group also agreed that they would much rather be videoed sitting down and in close-up. They explained that this would "cut out the gesturing". The argument seemed to be that, when they stood, they were inclined to gesture more - and that the long-shot in which the video was filmed drew attention to these gestures. They seemed to feel that the gesturing made them seem less poised and therefore less confident of their statements. One woman explained, here:

Standing influences your body language, then people think you don't know what you are saying. Standing appears unstable.

Facilitators pointed out to the group that here, too, they might be drawing on the conventions of mainstream television since, within these conventions, a close-up shot sometimes operates as an affirmation of the dominant assurance of the speaker.

This exercise could, I think, be taken further through an evaluation, by participants, of the conventions they were applying to the footage. They could, perhaps, film themselves using

various shots, angles, etc, and assess the difference this makes to the images they construct of themselves on the television screen. Participants could then decide whether the visual conventions of mainstream television could be appropriated to suit their own needs - and whether they needed to develop alternatives.

It became clear, secondly, that the women's response, at the start of the weekend, to stepping in front of the camera was an important reference point in the discussion of the video footage. It must be remembered that, in their evaluation of the initial exercise, the CAP participants had expressed growing confidence in their ability to "speak out" in public. The discussion which followed the viewing of the tape was also defined by a preoccupation with the issue of speaking out-but this time in very negative terms. One woman confessed, for example, that she felt "exposed" after watching her own performance, while another explained that she was "just a bit embarrassed because it is a public display". A third insisted that it is nevertheless necessary for women to become involved in expressing their views on television. It was clear, however, that she viewed this as a necessary evil rather than a pleasure:

If we are shy, who will stand up and say what needs to be said?" With that in mind we [are prepared to] prolong our own agony.

I do not think that these responses point to a radical deterioration of the women's level of confidence in their own ability to speak out in front of a camera. The point is, rather, that they were responding differently to two distinct experiences. In a reiteration of the statement quoted above, one of the participants made this distinction explicit:

You have to do it, [because it is] important to get the message across, *but you do not want to have to see yourself saying it* [my italics].

The participants reacted differently, in other words, to the act of making statements in front of the camera and the act of *looking at themselves* in the resulting film. I would suggest that the first act was one in which the women stepped out of a position they usually accepted (that, for example, of silence and uncertainty) and took up the position of the active, speaking subject. When, however, they had to "see [themselves] saying it", they became uncomfortably aware of the impropriety of what they had done. This discomfort could have been created by the fact that they were now, in a sense, looking at themselves from the outside, through the eyes of an imagined audience - through, in other words, a kind of "male gaze". In looking at the

film from the subject position offered by this gaze, the women became uncomfortable with the audacity of the step they had taken.

This does not, however, completely explain the women's disappointment with the video. We have seen that some women were critical of the fact that they were making a "public display" of themselves. It became clear that the participants also felt uncomfortable because one could see how vulnerable they felt while taking this step. They were intensely preoccupied with the fact that they appeared nervous and awkward in the video. One woman stated, here: "I was very disappointed. I didn't have a chance to prepare". On this point, the group was in agreement: they should have been given the chance to prepare more thoroughly for the recording, since this would have allowed them to school their body language and enunciation. It seems, therefore, that there was a second reason for the group's dissatisfaction. They felt that they should have been *more successful* at making a public display of themselves. In assessing their own performance, the group was, in fact, veering between the application of two opposing sets of criteria. The options presented by these criteria were, I think, similar to those offered to the audiences of mass media by the "male gaze". They chose, in other words, between identification with the position of the "feminine" object of the gaze, or the "masculine" subject.

I would suggest that they failed to meet either of the sets of criteria represented by these options. They failed, firstly, to meet the criteria which they usually apply to themselves - which may have been those of "feminine" modesty. At the same time, because they "exposed" themselves by appearing vulnerable, they failed to meet the criteria which they were trying to appropriate: those of "masculine" dominating assurance. This failure resulted, I think, from the fact that they had established for themselves such a highly limiting set of options. In taking this exercise further, facilitators would have to think of a way in which participants could assess the relevance of these options to their own needs. If this could be done successfully, participants might choose to transcend these options and to develop alternative ones.

We can see, within the "agony" experienced by these participants in seeing themselves both as the subjects and the objects of the viewing process, the discomfort of the unstable relation which exists between women and the screen. It seems to me that, if the participants could accept that this instability presents them with a powerful point of feminist resistance,

one would be able to establish the basis for a powerful approach to feminist community media education.

## Conclusion

I have argued that the meaning of visual media is established through a negotiation which takes place between viewers and the subject positions offered to them by media texts. This negotiation represents an engagement, by viewers, with the contradictions and tensions within which their sense of identity is based. I proposed, furthermore, that a critical discussion, by viewers, of this negotiation could realise the subversive potential of such an engagement. Within a group context, the fulfilment of such potential could take the form of a confrontation with power dynamics which exists amongst viewers. My examination of the video workshop focused on the participants' *willingness* to involve themselves in such a critical discussion. I looked, furthermore, at the participants' *ability* to relate the discussion of media to the existence, within the group, of power dynamics - given the theoretical frameworks available to the group in their evaluation of the viewing process. Facilitators and participants negotiated the establishment of such frameworks of approach within the course as a whole, and these determined both the restrictions and potential of the discussions which took place within the video workshop. Important examples of such frameworks are the set of assumptions which existed around the supposed advantages of a "women-only" environment; the degree of familiarity of the group with "languages" of media analysis such as that of the "sociological" and "structuralist" approaches discussed in Chapter 2; the aims attributed to feminist media analysis and to feminist media education; the approach to the relation between supposedly "feminist" texts and those that are seen as "exploitative", the understood political implications of ascribing categories of fact, fiction "entertainment" and "education" to media; and the approach to the relationship between critical analysis and the pleasures of viewing.

We have seen that, on the first day of the workshop, the challenge of looking critically at the exploration of the viewing process was taken up by the women to varying degrees. In the end, the discussions nevertheless tended to "close off" the subversive potential of this exploration. I would say that, on the second day of the workshop, the group managed to break through some of the restrictions which informed these discussions. Within the first

session of this day (which dealt with *The Accused*), the women reiterated many of the concerns and assumptions which had previously informed their discussions. The argument around *The Accused* allowed, in other words, for the articulation of many of the restrictive frameworks of approach listed above. It did so, furthermore, in context of an equally restrictive approach to female sexuality and violence against women. By inviting participants to relate this discussion to the viewing of rest of the texts the fourth session, we were able to address the strengths and weaknesses of these frameworks, and began to establish the necessary foundations for the development of a more powerful language of social criticism.

One of the most important factors which enable this process to take place was, I think, the workshop's emphasis on intertextuality. Through the juxtaposition of the video material presented in this workshop, the participants were able to explore the fact that visual media do not offer a window on reality but rather exist as a range of constructions of meaning. They were able to look, furthermore, at the role of these constructions in offering various versions of reality, each informed by different ideological frameworks. Through this emphasis on intertextuality they were able to look critically at the notion that a supposedly "feminist" text such as *The Accused* is free of manipulative power relations. They also confronted the possibility that even very ordinary, mundane advertising-such as the second version of the Nashua advertisement - could form part of the spectrum of media which contributes to the exploitation of women in society. Most importantly, through the emphasis on intertextuality, we were able to transcend the opposition between critical analysis and viewing pleasure. In my view, the sequence from *Thelma and Louise* played a particularly important role in this process. I have argued that it creates a fluid, ambiguous interplay between traditional cinematic institutions and their feminist appropriation-and thus transcends the opposition between feminist and mainstream media, and between serious feminist analysis and pleasurable viewing. We saw that the women responded with immediate excitement to the discussion of *Thelma and Louise*, entering into the process of critical analysis without any sense of giving up the pleasure gained from viewing this text.

It seems to me that there is an immense subversive potential in the pleasure derived from viewing both politically "sound" and "unsound" material. At the same time, this potential can only be realised if one admits to the complex range of ideological frameworks which inform such pleasure-and if the exploration of these frameworks can become enjoyable



in itself. The process of evaluating this workshop has brought me to the conclusion that it is within pleasure in analysis that one can find the most important guideline for the establishment of a culture of feminist community media education. In designing workshops dealing with such education one needs, in other words, to search for ways in which the critical engagement with texts from mass media can in itself become as enjoyable as the viewing of such media.

I would suggest that, if such a culture of critically aware enjoyment can be established, the instability of the relation between women and the screen would no longer be experienced in the terms expressed by participants in the last section of this workshop. They would, in other words, no longer find the recognition of themselves as both the subject and object of the male gaze and "agony" that must be "prolonged" only because of the desperate need to "speak out". Instead, they would be able to claim as their own the pleasures of mass media - and to restate these pleasures in terms which suit their own needs.

## CONCLUSION

The central aim of this research project has been two-fold. The first aim was to determine the potential value of feminist film theory as a resource for the establishment of a widely-based culture of critical viewing. The second aim was to identify, and evaluate, a context within which film theory could realise this potential. Here, I chose to focus on community education as a practice which could represent such a context. I set out to find a way in which such education could draw on feminist film theory as a valuable resource. Through this research project, I hoped to establish how the political relevance of feminist film theory could be extended beyond its disciplinary boundaries.

I found that the interdisciplinary nature of this research project posed some difficulties. It became clear, above all, that there is a need to acknowledge that film theory and media education are both historically situated practices, informed by the shared values and beliefs of particular groups of people. I found that it was particularly important to take into account the fact that film theory and media education are defined by very different approaches to the issue of literacy. As pointed out at various points in the thesis, film theory tends to reaffirm the notion that it is only a small, specialised group of people who are "literate" in the critical analysis of media. Community education sets out, on the other hand, to make specialised knowledge widely accessible. The location of film theory within media education therefore results in a clash of interests.

One of the most important conclusions I have come to is that community-based feminist media education should not simply consist of workshops which teach participants the principles of film theory. Film analysis should operate, instead, as an element within discussions amongst groups of viewers who have a shared interest in the critique of media. Such groups should include viewers whose approach to the critique of media is based in widely accepted, "commonsense" assumptions about the political operation of media. The discussions which occur within workshops should be understood as a platform on which both the formulations of film theory and those of such commonsense assumptions can be constantly challenged and adapted. The aim of this negotiation would be to establish guidelines for the development of a culture of critical viewing which transcends the limitations of both these approaches to the political critique of media.

I have presented, in this thesis, some basic guidelines for feminist media education. These guidelines could, I believe, form a valuable basis for the establishment of a tradition in community-based, feminist media criticism. However, in order to realise this potential, future research projects will have to take this exploration further. I think that such research could usefully focus on the role of feminist media education as a supportive structure for the establishment of projects focusing media monitoring projects, and community media projects.

The CAP women's media course has recently developed into a more diverse programme which focuses on projects of this kind. The facilitators who designed the original course have initiated a "media watch", which consists of a network of small groups, each focusing on a different area of media "activism". This network includes a group devoted to media "monitoring", another dedicated to lobbying and advocacy around women's relation to the media, a third concerned with critical media awareness (which they intend to address by means of a weekly programme broadcast on community radio), and a fourth which plans to stage creative interventions into media politics by means of, for example, marches and festivals. As part of the development of resources for this network, the CAP facilitators hope to develop further media education workshops and to present these in the form of a training manual.

I have indicated, in the introduction to this thesis, that feminist film analysis represents one of the few film practices which understands the process through which meaning is constructed within media texts as a negotiation within power relations. I suggested that acknowledgement of such power relations is essential to critical practice. I still believe that, for this reason, feminist film analysis is essential to critical practice. I still believe that, for this reason, feminist film analysis could make a valuable contribution to the establishment, through community media education, of a culture of feminist media criticism. Such analysis could, for example, play a role within projects such as the CAP programme described above - and, in this way, make a significant intervention into the ideological operation of mainstream media.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **THE WORKSHOP MATERIAL: A DESCRIPTION**

The following appendix provides a description of the various media texts discussed in the CAP video workshop. This description, which consists of photographs and brief written summaries of the texts, represents an important point of reference for the last two chapters of this thesis.

#### **The two versions of the Nashua Advertisement**

In both versions of the advertisement, the soundtrack consists of a song, intoned in a deep male voice:

"Only you can make the world seem right/ only you can make the darkness  
bright/ only you and you alone can thrill me like you do/ and fill my heart with  
love for only you ..."

We see a fair-haired little boy sitting in what appears to be his' father's office (which is spacious, modern and full of light). He is drawing a valentine's card consisting of brightly coloured crayoned letters, spelling out the words "I LOVE ONLY YOU". A man (presumably his father) walks past, and ruffles his hair. We watch the boy making a colour-photocopy of the card. We then see the boy (whose name, Byron, is inscribed on his satchel) in a school uniform standing on a landing of a flight of stairs. He is handing out colour copies of the valentine to a row of uniformed little girls as they hurry past him. The little girls are mostly white, although there are some black children.

In the first version, Byron conveniently bends down to fetch more copies from his satchel just as the black children walk past - so that they do not receive any valentines. When this advertisement had originally been screened, there was an outcry about the exclusion of the black children. Nashua was pressurised into commissioning a second version in which both black and white children receive valentines. This version of the advertisement is almost identical to the first, except for one significant detail: this time, Byron straightens up in time to give valentines to the black children.

## **As Large As Life**

*As Large as Life* is a documentary which explores the relationship between the representation of women in mass media and the prevalence of eating disorders amongst South African women. It suggests that illnesses such as Anorexia and Bulimia are simply at the extreme end of a spectrum of eating disorders which all "normal" women suffer from to various degrees. These issues are dealt with by means of a series of interviews with "authorities" on eating disorders and media analysis as well as with "ordinary" women who speak about their bodies and about eating.<sup>49</sup> Footage from these interviews was interspersed with examples of images (mostly from advertising) of women's bodies, and a few documentary stills of emaciated women, showing the symptoms of anorexia and bulimia.

## **The Sequence from *The Accused***

At the beginning of this sequence, Ken is shown walking into the court room and entering the witness stand.<sup>50</sup> He is questioned by Catherine about the night at the Mill, and, as he speaks, we see what he is describing. We see Sarah entering the bar, and sitting down to chat and drink with her friend Sally, the barmaid. We see the men watching her, and Sarah flirting with one of them. She follows this man into a back room of the bar, where there is a Juke Box and pinball-machines. She plays a game on one of the machines, while the men in the games room flirt with her. When one of the men tries to proposition her, she avoids him by beginning to dance to the juke-box music. The men watch her dance, and she enjoys their admiration.

## **The sequences from *Thelma and Louise***

*Thelma and Louise* is a story about two women who take to the road after one of them protects the other from attempted rape and ends up killing the would-be rapist. Pursued by the police, they drive across mid-Western landscapes in the hope of crossing the border into Texas.

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<sup>49</sup> This video has recently been produced by Nicky Newman and Miki Van Zyl.

<sup>50</sup> I assume, in my description of this sequence, that I do not need to familiarise readers with general background information regarding the characters and the plot of the film, since these are provided extensively in Chapter Three.

In the first sequence selected for the CAP workshop, the women are shown driving along in an open car, through a wide open landscape. They find themselves behind a fuel tanker. The tanker is huge and shiny, reflecting the landscape and the cloudy sky. The driver pulls over, signalling that they should pass. They make appreciative comments to each other about his politeness. However, as they drive past, they exclaim in disgust because the driver is leering at them, making obscene comments - including flicking his tongue in and out at them. He then weaves back and forth across the road behind them, honking his horn.

In the second sequence, which takes place much later in the film, Thelma and Louise are again driving along a road in the same landscape. They see the tanker ahead of them and decide to take their revenge. Signalling for the tanker to stop, they indicate that they are now "ready" to "play". Both the car and the truck draw up on the roadside, with squealing breaks and clouds of dust. The driver jumps down, does a little jig of anticipation, and swaggers across to their car. The women, who have hitched themselves up to sit on top of the car seats, look the driver up and down and chide him for his behaviour on the road. When he refused to apologise, Louise takes out a gun and flattens the tyres of his truck. The driver, angry and frightened, bellows "Fuck you!", at which both women cheerfully aim for the fuel tanker itself, which goes up in a vast ball of flame. Thelma and Louise drive off, whooping and laughing. The camera moves back to a birds' eye view of the scene: far below, we see the wreck with a huge column of black smoke rising to the sky and the truck driver hopping around in a rage.

### **The two versions of the Steers Advertisements**

In the first version, two young women are driving over a landscape strikingly similar to that of the scene in *Thelma and Louise*. Like the women in the film, they are in an open car. They are eating hamburgers and chips. A truck has pulled alongside them and the driver (remarkably more attractive than the one in *Thelma and Louise*) is grinning down at them. The women, eyeing him throughout, eat in a sexually provocative manner. One drops tomato sauce on her breast, rubs it into her skin, and licks her fingers dreamily; the other eats chips as if she is having oral sex. Superimposed on these images, a message flashes: "REAL SAUCY". The truck driver looks at them with jovial excitement - but as their eating becomes more and more suggestive, his expression changes to one of grim purpose. The

truck comes to a screeching halt, the driver jumps out, and strides over to the women's (now stationary) car. Along the way, he halts and hitches up his belt. This image is filmed from below and as a close-up of his crotch, with a message flashing "REAL BEEF". On the soundtrack, the movement is accompanied with an impressive booming noise. We then see him reaching into the car, while the women are frantically shrinking away from him: it looks as if his hand is aiming in between the one woman's legs. He straightens up holding a Steers hamburger and bites into it, then wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, looking satisfied. Across the screen, a message flashes: "REAL FOOD". The image fades to be replaced by the Steers Logo.

In the second Steers advert we again see the two women driving along. They pass a young man - lean and rangy, à la Brad Pitt - standing on the roadside, hitch-hiking.<sup>51</sup> He looks tired and thirsty, and seems disappointed when they simply roar past. He picks up something that has blown out of their car; it is a paper bag with the Steers logo. He closes his eyes, fantasising, and on the screen an image appears of a Steers hamburger and Coke, with price. When he hears the car hooter, the young man opens his eyes, to see that the women have pulled up further along the road and are waving at him. He races off to join them, and the image fades to be replaced by the Steers Logo.

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<sup>51</sup> In order to understand the relevance of the second version of the Steers advertisement to *Thelma and Louise*, it is important to note that, in the film, the women pick up a young hitch-hiker, played by sex idol Brad Pitt. He is presented, within the film, as yet another man who exploits women - but also as Thelma's opportunity for sexual self-discovery.

## APPENDIX B

### THE WORKSHOP MATERIAL: A DESCRIPTION

Apart from the discussion of *The Accused* in Chapter Three, this thesis deals with the video material presented in the CAP workshop primarily in terms of the participants' comments. Ideally, I would also have liked to include a discussion of my own analysis of these texts, the motivations which informed my inclusion of the texts in the video workshop, and the process through which I arrived at the final selection of texts. This would, however, have made the sections dealing with the CAP workshop very lengthy, and the presentation of a succinct line of argument would have become unmanageable. I have opted, instead, for including such a discussion in the form of this appendix. This discussion represents a valuable addition to the points made in the thesis. It illustrates the practical constraints involved in the design of such a workshop - and documents workshop ideas which I was forced to abandon but which could usefully be taken up in other contexts.

#### The one-day workshops

As explained in Appendix B, preparation for the CAP course included a series of "one-day workshops" with the organisations from which we hoped to recruit participants for the final course. The workshop dealt with a variety of media - including video, magazines, and documentary photography. In each workshop, the slot dealing with video-material focused on *The Accused*. Since this slot was only one hour long, it was not possible to screen the whole film. For each of the workshops, I therefore selected different extracts from *The Accused* and also experimented with screening other material in conjunction with extracts from this film. It is useful to look, briefly, at the way in which this process led to the final design of the section of the course which deals with video material.

In the first workshop, I opted for the sequence in which Sarah faces the Scorpion in the parking lot, and he taunts her about the rape. She crashes her car into his truck, and has to be taken to hospital. When Katherine visits her there, Sarah accuses her of having "sold out" by settling out of court. In Chapter Three I argue that this sequence occurs at the "half-way point" of the film's narrative structure. By this point, the film has dealt with - and dismissed - the questions posed by the first court case: that is, whether the rape had taken



place, and whether the rapists should be punished. Katherine has reached the point at which she realises that there are deeper questions which must be answered - questions to do with the differentiation between mediated violence and "real" violence. She is about to begin an exploration of a whole new set of issues, relating to the culpability of the spectator in the show of violence - and then in the occurrence of "real" violence. It seemed to me that, by discussing this sequence, participants would be able to explore the role of media in either challenging or reinforcing the power relations that give rise to violence against women. Furthermore, the focus on the culpability of audiences, in this sequence, would allow for a discussion of the relationship between media and violence which would not fall into the usual simplistic frameworks.

The screening and discussion of this text was not, however, successful. Although the participants were intrigued with the process of viewing and discussion, it was clear that they needed to be familiar with the whole film in order to make sense of this one sequence. This was not possible in a one-hour workshop slot.

In the second workshop I settled, therefore, for a screening of the sequence described in Appendix A - in which Sarah dances in the games room. Unlike the first sequence, this one seemed to have the potential to stand on its own, without detailed reference to the rest of the film. Furthermore, the dancing sequence draws attention to what I regard as one of the central principles of film theory - that of women as the object of the male gaze.

The workshop slot which resulted from this was, again, not to my satisfaction. The screening resulted in a very similar discussion to the one described in Chapter Six; a heated debate about Sarah's responsibility, or otherwise, for having been raped. I found, in other words, that the women were interested only in talking about the *content* of the sequence - and could not be drawn into a discussion of the cinematic construction of the text.

It was for this reason that I decided to include, in the third version of the workshop, the sequence in which Sally, the barmaid, notices what is happening to her friend in the games room. In my discussion of this sequence in Chapter Three, I argued that when the Scorpion turns round, points straight into the camera and shouts "you next", viewers identify with the viewpoint of the person he is pointing at. I argued, furthermore, that it is unclear whether he is pointing at Sally or one of the men who are watching the rape. Because of this, viewers can either interpret his words as meaning "you to be raped next" or "you to rape

next". They identify, therefore, either with Sally's viewpoint or that of the group of men who are watching the rape. The screening of this sequence allowed me to lead the discussion of the *Accused* beyond an evaluation of its content to an appreciation of its semantic construction. Participants were able to explore the fact that, within the viewing process, one makes decisions which inform the meaning of a film and, therefore, that one bears responsibility for that meaning.

### **The CAP video workshop**

My initial impulse, in designing the final workshop which formed part of the CAP course, was that it should focus on *The Accused* - since this text was of central importance to my thesis, and since it was included in the one-day workshops. The workshop would begin with a full screening of the film, which would be followed by a close analysis of all the sequences I included in the initial one-day workshops referred to above. For this discussion, the participants would select sequences which, in their view, are crucial to the film's treatment of violence against women. During the course of this discussion, participants would be introduced to relevant principles of feminist film theory. The discussion of the film would be videoed, and some of this material could be integrated with sequences from the film. If the workshop contained training in basic video editing techniques, the women could, as part of the programme, select and edit this material themselves. The tape could then be used as a basis for future workshops, in which the whole exercise would be repeated - in this way, a valuable resource could be developed.

In negotiating the design of this section with the other members of the project, it was decided, however, that a range of other material besides *The Accused* had to be included. Furthermore, only two days were allocated for the video section of the course. Given these time constraints the plan described above was therefore not feasible. Training in video editing skills only works if each participant gains "hands-on" experience; for a group of twenty people, this would obviously mean a lengthy process which needed intensive facilitation. It soon became clear that there would not even be enough time to have a full screening of *The Accused* - discussion would have to focus on one or two short sequences. Apart from this, objections were raised in the steering committee to the idea of videoing the discussion. It was felt that, since we would be discussing a sensitive issue (i.e. violence

against women), the presence of the camera would inhibit people.<sup>52</sup>

It is against this background that we developed a workshop design that includes a section from *The Accused* as well as a range of other video texts. The motivations for including each of these texts should be clear from my discussion of the workshop in this thesis. This is particularly true for the section from *Thelma and Louise*, since this film is closely related to *The Accused* in terms of its subject matter. Similarly the inclusion of the Steers advertisement is easily explained by its close relation to the sequence from *Thelma and Louise*. It seems valuable, however, to provide some further explanation of my motivations for selecting the remaining texts - i.e. the Nashua advertisements and *As Large As Life*.

### **The Nashua advertisements**

What made this choice of material especially attractive to me was that it advertises media technology. The virtues of the photocopier, as illustrated in this advertisement, are representative of characteristics of "successful" mass media. The advertisement focuses, first of all, on the ability demanded of photocopiers to make many copies of one image and, in this way, reach a mass audience. It suggests, secondly, that this particular machine's ability to reproduce bright colours makes the copies as good as the original. This means that the advertisement touches on one of the primary aims of mass media: to reach a mass audience while at the same time making each one of those people feel that you are directing a personal "original" message at them alone. As such, this advertisement provides an excellent object of discussion for a media education workshop.

It is also important to note that this advertisement is highly selective in its choice of audience. It presupposes an audience which will only react positively to the transformation of a white school into one that is multiracial if the intrusion of black children is minimal. This is most clearly expressed in the first advertisement, which assumes that this audience will feel uncomfortable with the idea of a white boy giving a valentine to a black girl. One could argue that the second advertisement contains the same assumption. As such, the

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<sup>52</sup> In retrospect, I would argue that the presence of an inhibitive influence of this kind could, in fact, play a very constructive role within a media education workshop. Within a carefully designed workshop, one would be able to explore the power dynamics involved in the process of filming. In this way one could draw valuable conclusions about political implications of these dynamics.

advertisement illustrates the tendency of mass media to seem inclusive while it is really targeting particular audiences.

I have said, above, that the advertisement celebrates the ability of mass media to reach many people while at the same time personalising its message. One could argue that the text is itself preoccupied with the fact that this ability is really a false one - i.e. that media is exclusive. This is underlined by the words of the song. On the one hand, the phrase "only you" signifies exclusivity - on the other hand, its repetition could be said to create the impression of a multiplication of the exclusive recipient.

To me, the most interesting aspect of these texts, in context of the CAP workshop, was the interface between race and gender. The advertisement can be said to deal with two kinds of exclusions - one in terms of gender and the other in terms of race. The first can be seen within the role divisions set up within the narrative of the advertisement; one little boy takes charge of the photocopies, while the little girls are simply there to receive his ardent overtures. The second exclusion is a negotiated one; the school is multiracial (thus including black people into the perfect, glowing little world of the advertisement) but the black children do not receive valentines. I hoped that these two aspects of the advertisement would allow participants to explore, within the context of media politics, the issue I have raised in this thesis: the way in which the power relations between men and women can be related to a discussion of the social differences between women.

Private space is understood, within this advertisement, as a sphere which is removed from the world of politics and which remains unaffected by power relations. There are two ways in which the Nashua advertisement celebrates this idea of a private space. It does so, firstly, through its representation of children. I would say that, within this representation, the advertisement is positioning itself within a "private" space, i.e. one that is beyond political criticism. It does so by drawing on the general belief, in our society, that children should ideally be protected from "adult" concerns - such as sexual knowledge, the need to work for a living, involvement in organised "politics", involvement in violence. They should be allowed to enjoy a care-free, private space separate from this adult world. The bright, clean, affluent and colourful world depicted in this Nashua advertisement seems to represent such a space. Secondly, the advertisement has a narrative structure: it sketches out a little story - which, as I have pointed out in Chapter 6, takes the form of a joke. This marks the advertisement

clearly as entertaining rather than simply informative. In doing so, the advert positions itself in another "private" space. It does so by drawing a belief that the world of entertainment stands separate from that of politics - and as a last resort against the restrictions imposed on us by power relations.

The reason why I regard the aspects of the advertisement as problematic is that they form part of a reaffirmation of highly problematic conceptions of sexual identity. The actions which the children perform within the ideal world of the Nashua advertisement are regarded as natural, beyond criticism. It is suggested that it is simply a natural part of the male sexual identity to be promiscuous, and for women to be sexually passive, since even children so guilelessly "act out" these roles. As I have argued, in Chapter 5, if one is to criticise the advertisement's reproduction of this definition of sexual identity, one will also have to criticise the understanding of childhood - and the family - as a private, pre-social space. One would, similarly, have to abandon the idea of entertainment as a space which liberates one from the restrictions of power relations.

### **As Large As Life**

The rationale for including this film in the workshop was that its exploration of the violent effect that mass media can have on women's bodies helps to place the discussion of media within the context of violence against women. Since the film deals with the internalisation of destructive attitudes to women, it would also help to steer discussion towards a self-evaluative approach. It would therefore help to address the facilitators' concern about the fact that participants tended to avoid talking about their own positioning within the ideological operation of mass media, and were inclined to speak in impersonal and generalised terms. The documentary was, furthermore, presented as an example of a "feminist" response to mass media. The workshop was geared, after all, not only towards analysing the implications of the way in which women are portrayed in the media but was also meant to facilitate discussion of the way in which video could be used as a feminist tool of resistance to violence against women.

## **APPENDIX C**

### **THE WYNBERG GIRL'S HIGH MEDIA EDUCATION LESSON**

The following is an outline of the lesson presented at Wynberg Girls' High, referred to in Chapter Four. The aim of this lesson plan is to facilitate discussion around the role played by advertisements in the reproduction of oppressive representations - such as that of women, black people, etc. In choosing the advertisement which will be viewed during this lesson, this should be kept in mind. For the group activity, it has been assumed that there are a maximum of 35 participants.

#### **1: LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION**

Show the advertisement to the class, and then lead a brief introductory group discussion based on the questions given below.

##### **Questions:**

- What is this advertisement selling?
- What do you think of the advertisement?

##### **Expectations for discussion:**

The responses to these questions will depend on the advertisement chosen for this lesson, and also on the level of awareness and attitude to media prevalent in the class.

#### **2: LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION**

Hand out copies of the following image to each member of the class, and use these as the basis for a group discussion based on the questions provided below.

**Questions: round one**

- What do you see in this image?
- Why is it that some people see one thing, and other people see something else?

**Expectations for round one in discussion:**

The image is designed to illicit a range of responses from the class. They are, however, likely to see two main images in the sketch: those of a rabbit and bird. This conflict should lead to a discussion of the fact that the sketch can be said to be a picture of completely different things, depending on how one looks at it.

**Questions: round two**

- What kind of personality do you think the rabbit has, as opposed to the bird?
- Why do you say this?

**Expectations for round two of discussion:**

Again, the image is designed in such a way that the class is likely to say that the rabbit looks cute, or harmless, or silly and so forth while the bird looks malevolent, strange, etc.

**Issues to be drawn out/emphasised by facilitator**

At the conclusion of this discussion, emphasise that the image can therefore be said to have very different emotional connotations, depending on how one looks at it. Propose that visual media can be said to work in a very similar way. The advertisement which the class has just watched could, for example, be said to be cute, or entertaining, or funny. One can, however, also look at the advertisement in a very different way, and see that there are certain things about it that are strange, or disturbing, or maybe even harmful. Advertisements can, in other words, be "bunny rabbits" if one looks at them in one way, and "strange birds" if viewed in another.

**3: LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION**

Watch the advertisement for a second time. This time, the questions on which the discussion will be based must be asked before the viewing.

**Questions: round one**

- In what way it is this advert a bunny rabbit and in what way is it is strange bird?
- What did you see the first time you watched it; the bunny or the bird?
- Why do you think this is?

**Expectations for round one:**

The responses to these questions will depend on the advertisement chosen for this lesson, and also on the level of awareness and attitude to media prevalent in the class.

**Issues to be drawn out/emphasised by facilitator:**

Emphasises that it is often the "bunny rabbit" which one sees first when one looks at an advertisement; the "strange bird" is less obvious and must be looked for more carefully.

**Questions: round two**

- What do you think is the point of looking at advertisements in this way?
- Do you think it is important to look at advertisements in this way? Why/why not?

**Expectations for round two:**

The responses to these questions will depend on the level of awareness and attitude to media prevalent in the class.

**4: LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION**

Ask the class to imagine that the following four groups have become involved in a public debate about the advertisement.

1. The advertising company who produced the advertisement
2. The company whose product is being sold by the advertisement
3. A media monitoring group concerned about prejudice in television advertisements (ask the class to think of a name for this group)
4. A government board, which has been set up to make judgements about the validity of any



complaints made about advertisements

### Questions

- What do you think each of these groups would think of this advertisement?
  - Which groups are most likely to argue that the advertisement should not be broadcast, or should be changed?
  - Which groups are likely to argue the opposite?
  - Which groups would think it is important to look for the strange bird in advertisements?
- Why do you say this?

### Expectations for discussion:

The class should understand that group one and two are likely to argue in support of the broadcasting of the advertisement. They should also understand that group three and four are likely to be more critical of advertising - and its effects on social relations.

### Issues to be drawn out/emphasised by facilitator:

The facilitator should write responses to these questions on a blackboard or newsprint, so that the groups will be provided with guidelines once they are working in small groups.

## 5: SMALL GROUP WORK

Divide the class into four working groups, each taking on the point of view of one of the groups set out above. Ask them to each prepare an argument about the advertisement, based on the questions provided below. Each group will then be given the chance to present their argument to the class. Show the advertisement for a third time, before the groups begin their task.

Note: The facilitator would have to judge whether it is practical to let participants decide which group they want to join. This decision would depend on the range of attitudes which have been established, during the course of the lesson to the advertisement in particular, and more generally, to the importance of critical viewing. If the class is given no choice, it would be worthwhile to discuss with them the difficulties involved in arguing for a position with

which one does not agree, and also the value of doing so. By asking for comments from the class after each group presented their argument, one can allow for greater freedom for the expression of individual points of view.

### **Questions:**

-Do you think there are aspects of this advertisement which express prejudice? Why do you say this?

-If so, do you think it is important to point this out?

-Do you think this advertisement should be screened? Why/why not? - Do you think it should be changed in some way? Why/why not?

## **6: REPORTBACK: A DEBATE**

### **Expectations for discussion:**

The nature of this discussion will depend on whether the lesson has been successful in establishing interest in the topic of discussion and in preparing participants for the group work.

## **7: CLOSING DISCUSSION**

### **Questions**

-During the course of this lesson we have been looking at the advertisement in a way that is very different from the way we usually watch television. In what way was it different?

-Do you feel that you could use this way of looking at advertisements when you watch television at home?

-Do you think you will do so now?

### **Expectations for discussion:**

The nature of this discussion will depend on whether the lesson has been successful in establishing interest in the topic of discussion and in raising awareness around the issues involved in the critical viewing of advertisements.

## APPENDIX D

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION RE CAP WOMEN'S MEDIA PROJECT

The CAP Women's media education course was a project of the CAP Media Project. This organisation has, for more than ten years, been involved in community media facilitation. During the 1980s, the project was restricted by resistance conditions, and therefore emphasised participatory media production over media education and training. Since the dramatic political shifts which have taken place in South Africa since the early 1990s, the project has been able to change its strategies. It began seriously to address the long-standing need for media training and education, in the interest of community self-determination and self-sufficiency. This work took the form of courses planned and carried out in consultation with relevant community organisations. The CAP women's media course was developed in context of this change in strategy.

The CAP Women's Media course had two main aims. It set out, firstly, to "... investigate the effect media has on violence against women". Secondly, it aimed to "... develop a critical consciousness" around this issue, and around "... actions that women can take to ensure that their voices are heard" (CAP correspondence, 1992). The course was the first phase of developing a programme in a long-term project aimed at critical media monitoring and response.

The course was financed by two funders: the World Association for Christian Communication and OXFAM. Both these organisations were very happy with the objectives of the course as set out above.

The two project co-ordinators, Trish de Villiers and Gaby Cheminais, came from very similar backgrounds. Both had degrees in Fine Art, and also studied adult education at the University of the Western Cape. Both also had extensive experience working with community media organisations.

During 1992, CAP involved representatives from a range of organisations dealing with women's issues and community media in a steering committee the preparation of the course. This committee designed a one-day workshop dealing with media analysis in the context of violence against women. About ten organisations and groups involved in work relating to violence against women and community media were then invited to attend this

workshop. Through these workshops, the steering committee attempted to initiate discussion in these organisations in attending the course. The workshops also allowed the committee to gain clarity about the issues that the course would have to deal with, and about how this could be done. The groups that were approached included the Congress of South African Students, the ANC Women's League, Ilitha Labantu, the COSATU Women's Forum, SADTU, the Black Sash, a support group attached to the Mitchell's Plain Advice Office, the Primary Health Care Network, the Domestic Workers Union, and Disabled People South Africa.

The twenty women who finally took part in the course were also drawn from these organisations. These women held positions of educators or media officers within these organisations, or showed an active interest in holding these positions. Because of this, it was hoped that the impact of the course would extend beyond the education of those who would be participating directly. The women were, in other words, well placed to pass on the skills that they developed to others in their organisations. All of these women were black, and most of them working class.

## APPENDIX E

### MATERIAL FROM CAP COURSE: THE XHA ARTICLE

# WOMEN AND MEDIA

THE Community Arts Project is set to tackle the media establishment by focussing on oppression and violence against women by making their own intervention through discussion and training.



*Want me - want the product!*  
Picture from radio 702 Ad.



*Poverty is a marketable product.*  
Picture from news item on Somalia

These two photographs appeared on P.17 and P.18 of the Weekly Mail of Sept. 4th 1992. In the same edition the only other images of women were: 1 onlooker in crowd (news) 5 pin-up models (feature on girlie magazines), 9 secretaries (PC Review) 1 sportswoman (a sub-sub feature), 1 film actress (cinema guide).

There is nothing unusual in this, nor in the photographs themselves. Rather, they are typical. But seen together they draw attention to the stereotypes with extra clarity. Class, race, sexuality, 'motherhood', 'third world' - a host of meanings crowd these pictures. But what do they have in common?

#### The Unseen Element

Because both women are 'presenting' themselves to the camera, the presence of the unseen photographer is powerfully felt. This immediately provokes questions: Who chose the images? Who 'made' them? Who marketed them? And why? And there can be little doubt that both women were economically exploited in the process.

#### Images of Slavery

Both images are, in essence, images of slavery. Women, as seen through the media 'lens', are very, very rarely actors on history. Rather they offer themselves as servants, whores, collaborators or victims in a world created by others.

That is, when they appear at all.

It is often argued that the media reflects a social reality which will only change as women gain political, social and economic power. But it is also a highly selective view of reality and this selectiveness creates its own realities, undermining the ability of women to act on their own behalf. The media must be challenged on its own ground.

#### Women must be Media-makers

To change matters at the root, women must become makers of media in their own right, in particular those who are 'media irrelevant' as a consequence of their class, their race... or their non-conformity.

To make media, they need to learn how. But if they are to be more than technical assistants, production bunnies or typists, they need more than skills training. And if they are to challenge the power structures that dominate the media they need more than training programmes which simply open their doors more widely to women, without changing their content.

#### Building a Women's Perspective

As women we need to sharpen our understanding of how the media is playing back images about ourselves, to ourselves and to those around us. We need to find ways to act on this understanding now with the skills and information we have to hand. And we need to start developing a picture of what it is we want when we do take up training - what kind of skills we need and how will we

use them.

#### Getting a small ball rolling

The CAP Media Project is working on a women's media programme in an effort to start tackling these questions. The first stage is a series of one-day workshops with women's groups and organisations. These will lead up to and inform a more intensive course, scheduled to begin early next year for completion in May. Our aim is, among other things, that this course will generate useful insights and ideas for more specialised skills training programmes for women.

The programme is oriented firstly to community media and to what it is that women can do here and now through informal, non-professional communication networks. But there must also be a sustained effort to impact on national mainstream media. In the end this means building a programme of training that will enable women to professionalise their media activities.

#### A Focus on Violence

The main focus of the programme is on violence against women and its coverage in the media. Why?

We see such acts of violence, whether by state, employer, strangers, lovers or husbands as integral to the continuing oppression of women. And by extension they represent an acceptance of oppression of any kind as a social norm.

But the fact of this violence is hidden behind dense veils of myth and silence. Despite its wide daily occurrence it goes unrecognised by the media-makers in news or fiction alike. Furthermore in its portrayal of women, the media can be understood to be making an active contribution to the acceptance, if not the promotion of violence against women.

It is high time that the incidence of such violence is brought out from behind its hiding-places of culture and tradition and understood for what it is - an extension of the master's whip. And it is high time that its everyday occurrence becomes 'newsworthy'.

CAP would be very interested in hearing from you if you have questions, comments, ideas, suggestions around these issues and the proposed activities. Please do not hesitate to contact us on 021-478640 or c/o the MTF - speak to Trish, Gaby or Marlene.

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## **2. Unpublished sources**

Note: The material listed below has been bound together into a volume, and is available at the Community Arts Project's offices in Salt River, Cape Town.

1. Minutes from CAP Women's Media Education Course, 1993.
2. CAP correspondence relating to course
3. CAP Funding proposal
4. Minutes from the steering committee meetings of the CAP Women's Media Education Course, 1993.